



# Bravo Company 1987

61 Mechanized  
Battalion Group

International  
Edition

Dawid Lotter

**THIS COPY IS DEDICATED TO:**

**NAME:**

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*Handwritten signature: R. H. Lott*



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**3 October 2013**

**Editor and Translator: Deon Jordaan**

## DEDICATION

This e-book is not a research document. This is the story of Bravo Company and the Anti-Tank Platoon that served in 1987 at Omuthiya. The story is based on my personal experiences and memories as well as those of the members who had served together with me. Persons that were not part of us are quoted to a lesser extent. Their quotes are purely used to give the story necessary detail. We (33 members from the initial 176 serving in 1987) compiled this story. The compiling took place over a period of five weeks about events that happened 26 years ago. This is how we remembered them. We wrote the story as a tribute to a special group of people: **BRAVO COMPANY AND ANTI-TANK PLATOON, 61 MECHANISED BATTALION GROUP, 1987**. These warriors did not hesitate to go the extra mile. They were young, in the prime of their lives. They were between the ages of 17 and 24. Some of them were already married and had started their own families. They spoke English and Afrikaans. Some were not required to serve: Belgians, Portuguese and Greeks. They served because they believed that it was the honourable thing to do. Today they are residing in places all over the world - in Australia, New Zealand, USA, Canada and other countries. I SALUTE YOU!!!

Dawid Lotter

Bravo Coy and Anti-Tank Cdr: 1987

Date: 3 October 2013



## PREFACE

This story was written 26 years after the original events. Each person remembers things differently. The accuracy of the facts contained are subject to personal recollections and own interpretations. The original story was written partly in Afrikaans and partly in English. The two languages were freely mixed to keep the originality of the contributor's feelings. For this international version of the book the Afrikaans parts were however translated with a conscious effort to maintain the intent and character of contributions as closely as possible to the original. An attempt was made to keep the story timeline. Where this was not possible the aspect was discussed as part of a sub category. At no stage was the intention to belittle anyone or do damage to his reputation.

As background: The overall antagonists in this story were the SADF (*South African Defence Force*) and the SWATF (*South West African Territory Force*) waging an anti-terror, counter insurgency war against SWAPO (*South West African Peoples Organization*). SWAPO operated from bases in Angola and were supported by the Angolan army. At the same time the Angolan army, notably FAPLA (*Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola*) was fighting the rebel movement of Dr Jonas Savimbi, UNITA (*União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*). FAPLA had military support from Cuba and Russia (and some other East-Block countries, including fighter pilots from East-Germany) – in the form of ever increasing numbers of soldiers and more and more sophisticated armaments. The SADF (and the CIA) in turn supported UNITA, who also acted as a barrier against SWAPO insurgents in South Eastern Angola.

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**Soli Deo Gloria**

**Glory to God alone**



# **PART I: DECEMBER 1986 TO AUGUST 1987 - OVERVIEW AND ACTIVITIES**

## **CHAPTER 1 BRAVO COMPANY AS PART OF 61 MECH BN GP**

### **Short History of 61 Mech Bn Gp**

The history of Bravo Coy 1987 would not be complete without insight into the development and growth of 61 Mech Bn Gp. It started in 1978 when the 1 SAI Bn (1 South African Infantry Battalion) intake deployed to the Etale base in Ovamboland (in the extreme north of the then South West Africa (SWA), now Namibia) after training.

The unit strength was approximately 800 men. Conscription was extended to 24 months in that year but exemption was allowed for anyone that wanted to take up tertiary studies. The unit strength subsequently decreased to 200 men who were grouped as A Coy under command of Maj van Lill. A part of the company left for 1 SAI shortly afterwards to fetch the first Ratel 20's (6 wheeled, armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicles with 20mm semi-automatic cannon as main armament). The remainder were detached to other units.

In the meantime Cmdt Joep Joubert was busy evaluating the deployment of the Ratel in dense terrain. This evaluation was undertaken at a place that would later be called Omuthiya. The conclusion was that the Ratel could indeed be utilised successfully.

The first deployments of Combat Group Juliet, and also their first challenge, were crossing the border into Angola to search for, and rescue Sapper van der Mescht. Van der Mescht was captured during the night of 18 February 1978 in a SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization) raid just outside Elundu. Combat Group Juliet crossed the border into Angola just north of Eenhana on 21 February. In this swift action the unit overran two enemy bases and seized masses of equipment. Between 4 and 10 May 1978 they participated in Ops (Operation) Reindeer against a target at Chetequera. Equipment was sent to Grootfontein for maintenance and repair after these attacks.

In October 1978 it was decided to create a permanent mechanised unit in the SWA operational area. This unit would be based at Omuthiya. The initial name of the unit was 60 Mechanised Battalion Group but was changed to 61 Mechanised Battalion Group shortly afterwards. It's headquarters was moved from Oshakati to Tsumeb.

In 1979 the unit participated in Ops Awake and Ops Carrot. The purpose was to destroy SWAPO infiltrators in the farming areas south of Ovamboland. The new Omuthiya base was officially opened in November 1979 and old equipment was phased out and systematically replaced over the months to follow. During 1980 the base was further developed and commando units (citizen force self-protection units) were trained in the Tsumeb area. In June 1980 the unit also participated in Ops Sceptic with the aim of destroying the SWAPO command and control structures in south central Angola. Ops Carrot was then

continued.

During 1981 the unit was already established as one of the top first-line fighting units in the SADF (South African Defence Force). Until this stage, feeder units attached sub units to 61 Mech Bn Gp for short periods but the system was then changed to 12 month deployment periods.

The unit participated in Ops Protea during August 1981. The targets were Xangongo and Ongiva. The plan was to neutralise the SWAPO military capability in southern Angola between the Cunene and Kavango rivers. Ops Daisy followed in November 1981 with the purpose of destroying the SWAPO area headquarters in Chetequera and Bambi. 61 Mech, with its tactical headquarters in Ongiva, also participated in Ops Makro, an external counter-insurgency operation in Southern Angola.

In 1982 the unit started employing a new philosophy called “command initiative”. It was aimed at providing leaders on all levels with more freedom to make decisions. Ops Makro continued as a show-of-force and control operation around Xangongo, Mongua, Ongiva, Evale and Mupa. The unit participated in Ops Meebos I from 1 to 7 March 1982 with the purpose of coming to the aid of a citizen force unit that ran into trouble in Angola.

This was followed by participation in Ops Yahoo from 14 April to 25 May 1982. It was a similar operation to Ops Carrot but more aggressive and aimed against an

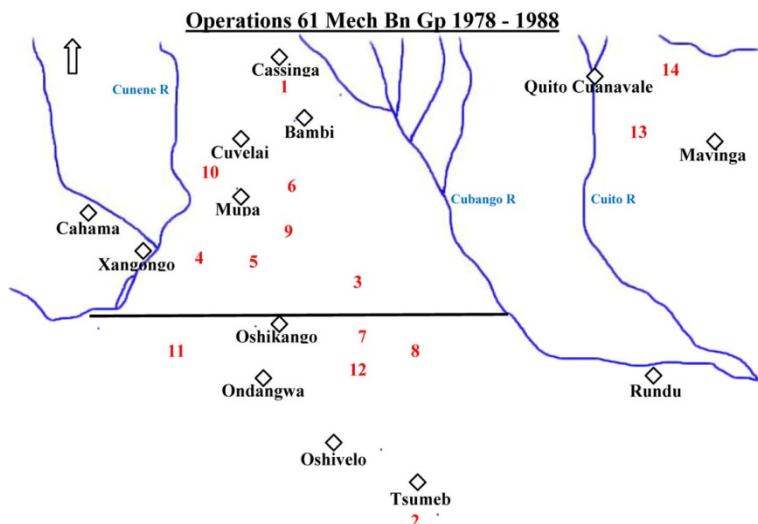
especially strong SWAPO infiltration. During Ops Meebos II, from 18 July to 30 August 1982, the unit was utilised as mobile reserve. The purpose was to provide protection to the attacking force against conventional deployments by FAPLA. The motive for the overall operation was to disrupt SWAPO bases deep inside Angola. It would inhibit SWAPO to control their insurgents in Ovamboland.

In 1983 61 Mech participated in Ops Phoenix, with the goal of cutting off SWAPO insurgents and to protect the farming community. Ops Dolfyn followed with the aim of limiting SWAPO infiltration. The unit formed a Combat Group (C Gp) laager at the Nehoni mission, dug in, and supported the local population with mobile and foot patrols.

Ops Askari took place during December 1983 and January 1984. The unit was tasked to tie up FAPLA forces at Cahama to prevent them from interfering with an attack on Cuvelai. The attack on Cuvelai would have been carried out by a citizen force combat group. 61 Mech Bn Gp had to however make haste to Cuvelai when Combat Group Delta refused to fight any further following an unsuccessful attack.

During 1984 the objective of the unit, by means of Ops Vasvat and Ops Nekomdraai, was to turn the local attitudes more positively towards the SADF. The objective was continued with Ops Pronkertjie and Ops Viper in 1985. During 1986 the unit again participated in area operations in Ovamboland. In 1987 the unit participated in

Ops Modulêr (translated as Modular) where this story of Bravo Company 1987 unfolded.



*1 - Ops Reideer (1978), 2 - Ops Awake en Ops Carrot (1979), 3 - Ops Sceptic (1980), 4 - Ops Protea (1981), 5 - Ops Makro (1982), 6 - Ops Meebos (1982), 7 - Ops Yahoo (1982), 8 - Ops Phoenix (1983), 9 - Ops Dolfyn (1983), 10 - Ops Askari (1983), 11 - Ops Vasvat and Ops Nekomdraai (1984), 12 - Ops Pronkertjie and Ops Viper (1985), 13 - Ops Modulêr (1987), 14 - Ops Hooper (1988).*

### **History of Bravo Company over the Years**

As previously mentioned, before 1981 all sub units performing service at 61 Mech Bn Gp were detached from the various feeder units on a short term basis. In 1981 the system changed and approval was obtained for 12 month deployment periods. The Bravo Coy commanders and operations that they participated in were as follow:

Ops Carrot: April 1981 - Capt Koos Liebenberg.

Ops Protea: August 1981- Capt Koos Liebenberg.

Ops Daisy: November 1981 - Capt Koos Liebenberg.

Ops Makro: December 1981 to January 1982 - Capt Thomas Dreyer.

Ops Meebos I: March 1981- Capt Thomas Dreyer.

Ops Yahoo: April to May 1982 - Capt Vissie Visser.

Ops Meebos II: July to August 1982 - Capt Vissie Visser.

During 1983 several relief companies from the feeder units served at 61 Mech Bn Gp. The unit participated in Ops Phoenix and Dolfyn. Ops Askari was executed by the 1983 1SAI Bn intake under command of 61 Mech Bn Gp. After Ops Askari the companies returned to 4 SAI Bn. There was no Bravo coy during 1984. The four 4 SAI Bn infantry companies were detached to 61 Mech Bn Gp on a rotational basis. During 1985 there were again no permanent infantry companies at 61 Mech Bn Gp.

Lt Dolf Bam recalls: *“The year 1985 was the silence after the storm of the operations during 1981 to 1984. Alpha Coy of 4 SAI Bn was under command of Maj Jaap Steyn (1 SAI Bn) at first. The leader group was permanent force staff members like Attie Vermeulen and Diederick Reineke as platoon commanders. Then there were national service platoon commanders like Wessie and Bass. The 1 SAI Bn staff members later went back to Bloemfontein and Maj Vickus Venter and WO2 Pretorius took over*



*command. They did clear out again with us (B and C Coys) in 4 SAI Bn.”*

But all indications were that the “silence after the storm” was busy changing. It was clear that it was just a matter of time before FAPLA would carry out a full-scale march on Mavinga - the starting point for the conquest of Jamba.

At the end of 1985 I was transferred to 61 Mech Bn Gp as permanent Bravo Coy commander. In 1986 there was only one infantry company at 61 Mech Bn Gp. Bravo Coy consisted of three mechanised infantry platoons, an 81mm mortar platoon and the storm pioneer platoon. The storm pioneer platoon was converted into an anti-tank platoon later in the year. At the end of 1986 I was promoted to 2<sup>nd</sup>-in-command of 61 Mech Bn Gp but declined the appointment. I wanted to remain company commander for another year.

Bravo Coy 1987 participated in Ops Modulêr – and transferred a spotless record to the Ops Hooper staff at the end of 1987.



Cmdt Kobus Smit: Officer Commanding 61 Mechanised Battalion Group

The best of the best.

## CHAPTER 2

### **BRAVO COMPANY 1987 INFRASTRUCTURE**

This part deals with our leader group, composition and facilities of Bravo Coy.

#### **Leader Group**

Bravo Coy was the favourite sub unit of both Cmdt Smit and RSM (Regimental Sergeant Major) Kemp. They could naturally not acknowledge it openly. Cmdt Smit knew that any task he gave us would be executed to the finest detail. We always finished what we started. RSM Kemp was the Bravo Coy Sergeant Major in 1986 and he retained his loyalties towards us as RSM in 1987.

#### **Commander of 61 Mech Bn Gp**



Cmdt Kobus Smit

The effectiveness of any organisation depends on the quality of its leaders. In 1987 Bravo Coy/ATk (Anti-Tank) was privileged to serve under Cmdt Kobus Smit. He transformed our residence at 61 Mech in the years 1986/1987 into an unforgettable experience.

## **Regimental Sergeant Major**



WO1 Kobus Kemp

## **Bravo Company**

### **Commander**



Maj Dawid Lotter

### **2<sup>nd</sup>-in-Command**



Lt Chris Vorster

### **Coy Sergeant Major**



S/Sgt Ben Smit

### **Coy Store Quartermaster**



Sgt Hans Swart

**HQ PI Sgt**



Cpl Henry Skinner

**Infantry Platoons**

**PI 4 Commander**



2Lt Fanie du Preez

**PI Sgt**



Cpl Dries Peyper

**PI NCO**



Cpl George Riley

**PI 5 Commander**



2Lt Robbert Szefranic

**PI Sgt**



Cpl Riaan Rhind

**PI NCO**



Cpl Kleynhans

**Pl 6 Commander**



2Lt Roelof van Wyk  
Walt

**Pl Sgt**



Cpl Willie Uys

**Pl NCO**



Cpl Marius vd

**Anti-Tank Groups**

**ATk Gp 71 Commander**



2Lt Anton Pretorius

**ATk Gp Sgt**



Cpl Jaco Swanevelder

**ATk Gp 72 Commander**



2Lt Johan Kooij

**ATk Gp Sgt**

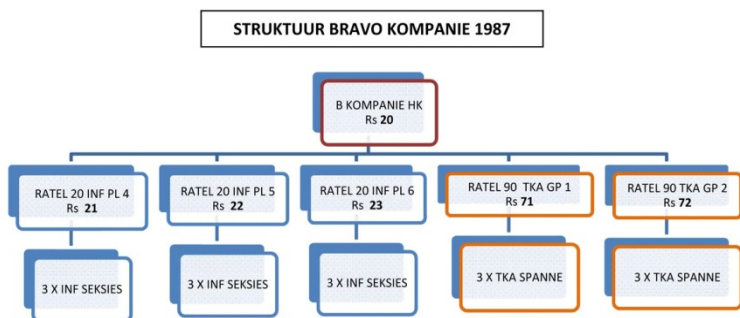


Cpl Andries Schreuder

## The Composition of Bravo Coy 1987

There was no support company headquarters at 61 Mech Bn Gp during 1987.

The sub-sub units that would normally form part of a support company structure were attached to and under command of the two infantry companies. Alpha Coy (Maj Flip van Wyk) inherited the 81mm Mortar Platoon. The Anti-Tank Platoon was placed under command of Bravo Coy.



When referring to Bravo Coy in this script it therefore implies the combination of Bravo Coy's three structural platoons (Call Signs 21, 22 and 23) as well as the two Anti-Tank Groups (Call Signs 71 and 72). This grouping was trained together and deployed in Ovamboland for area protection. It was also maintained as such through Ops Modulêr and until the end of the year. During the year I did a presentation to Cmdt Smit whereby I planned to divide Bravo Coy into combat elements. I reasoned that the sub unit could be more effective if the sub-sub units could combine structurally, especially in conventional battle preparation. Approval was granted.



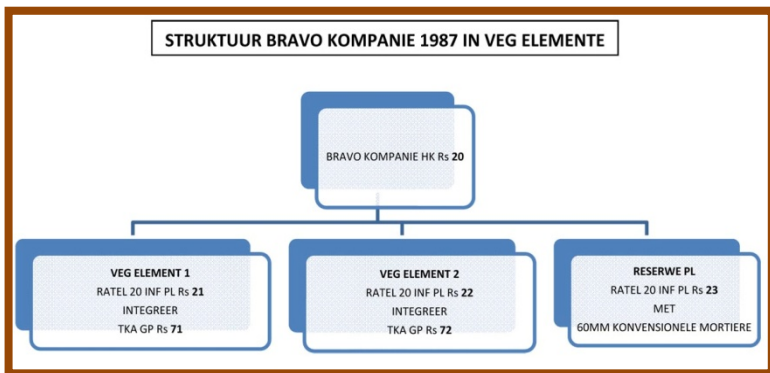
The subsequent combining resulted in the following: Call Signs 21 and 71 merged as Combat Element 1, while Call Signs 22 and 72 were known as Combat Element 2. These combinations were not so rigid that it could not adapt to changing circumstance. As such, Call Sign 72 was detached to 32 Bn for the attack on 13 September 1987 during Ops Modulêr.

With these structural groupings of composite combat elements the exchange of mutual needs was easy. In this way the Ratel 20's anti-aircraft gunners could act as extra loading crew for the Ratel 90's (with a 90mm low-velocity gun as main armament). While the Ratel 90's received extra hands the limited space problem in the Ratel 20's was also alleviated. These mergers proved to be of great value later on. During Modulêr there were several situations where the Ratel 90's had to maintain an unusually high rate of fire and it was made possible by the extra crew member in the back of the Ratel 90's.

Platoon 6 (Call Sign 23) was also converted into a 60mm conventional mortar group. They then served a dual purpose – primarily as a mechanised infantry platoon with parallel application as mortar group. More about this is to follow in the Chapter dealing with training. This combat element configuration did not have a notable influence on the Bravo Coy echelon but the operational packing plan was reviewed.

The theory of replenishment and support was that each sub-sub unit's backpacks, with sleeping bags and spare clothing, were transported on each sub-sub unit's

echelon vehicle. The echelon commander would then make each sub-sub unit's echelon vehicle available when going into a laager - and withdraw it again in the morning.



The doctrine was that the crew of a Ratel would only carry their battle jackets and chest webbings. This however caused challenges as the echelon would not necessarily join the combat elements each evening. I did a presentation to Cmdt Smit whereby I requested that all backpacks be returned to the main store in the base. The individual's packing plan was then changed to a micro containerised system.

Each member received a 20mm ammunition case wherein they could pack personal items like clothing and shaving kits. The ammo cases were then stacked in the aisle next to the Ratel's engine compartment. This ensured that everyone had access to their personal kit at all times. The combat elements would therefore not be bound by the movements of the echelon. The same ammo cases were also used as washbasins.



Advantages of this system were proven throughout the whole of Ops Modulêr. Other sub units, working on the old system, arrived in the first laager area in Angola with their backpacks – which then ended up in the aisle next to the engine compartment. Limited space inside the Ratel was therefore even more cramped, while it also added to the fire risk. This change in packing plans afforded Bravo Coy/ATk much more flexibility.

## **Facilities**

**Offices:** The Bravo Coy HQ was part of a corrugated iron complex consisting of four offices, two of which were

assigned to Alpha Coy. The two Bravo Coy offices housed the company commander and the 2<sup>nd</sup>-in-command. Lt Vorster's office was also the general admin office. There was a large signpost in front of the commander's office with the famous words of Churchill: *"You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word. It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival."*

**The Blockhouse:** The PH de Villiers Blockhouse was built next to Bravo Coy lines during 1986. It contained two offices, one for the Pl/Gp commanders and one for the Pl Sgt's/Pl NCO's/Gp Sgt's. Due to space restrictions in the CSQM store the Blockhouse also served as storage space during deployment.



Koos Cronje (B Coy 86) recalls: *"The Blockhouse was designed and built by Rifleman Britz. He was a very stocky guy. He performed a neat piece of work with only a few men. His nickname was Corobrik afterwards."* (Corobrik: a well-known local clay brick manufacturer.)

**The Store:** The Bravo Coy store was part of the main QM (Quarter Master) store.



Photo: Barry Marchall Snyman

**Showers:** The Bravo Coy shower complex was a corrugated iron building about 100m from the company lines. It was repaired and repainted in 1986 and was also used as a place to have Bravo Coy barbeques.



**Vehicle Park:** Our vehicle mustering area was south of the Bn HQ. All stable parades and vehicle maintenance were performed here. This was also the place we spent most of our time when not deployed – at our Ratels!



**Company Lines:** We had a theme surrounding our sleeping and lodging areas. The “streets” between tents had the following names, among others: Via Principales (the main “street” to the parade ground), Via Magnorum, Via Apia, Via Pretoriana, etc. The Asterix and Obelix characters were used on name boards in front of the blocks of tents to provide a bit of colour.



The tent blocks were also named after the Roman encampments around Asterix’s village: Laudanum, Compendium, Aquarium, Totorum and others.



## CHAPTER 3

### TRADITIONS

This chapter deals with the traditions of Bravo Coy. Most traditions originated in 1986 and 1987, some a bit longer back.

#### Insignia

The Bravo Coy motto and emblem originated back in 1981.

During that year Maj Koos Liebenberg, Bravo Coy commander, told his officers to design a unique Bravo Coy logo. Gustav de Wet and Ettienne Gertzen's first design was a dagger through a skull. Gustaf proposed the motto: Vini Vidi Vici. It remained such until 1986.



In 1986 I corrected the spelling to that of the original Latin words. I am not sure whether it was the correct thing to do; a motto remains a motto like it originated – whether spelled correctly or not. However, since 1986 the revised motto applied: “*Veni, Vidi, Vici*”. It was what Julius Caesar said, according to Shakespeare: “*I came, I saw, I*



*conquered*”. The dagger was also replaced by the lightning bolt in the same year, to tie in with the 61 Mech Bn Gp emblem.

The revised design was first used as a shoulder flash in 1987. After 1987 it underwent some changes again. There were shape, dimensional and edging differences between the first, second and following versions.



Gert Minnaar recalls: “My, *Gustav de Wet and Ettienne Gertzen’s first design for Bravo Coy in 1981 was a dagger through a skull and was displayed on the gate of the “Potgieter Pen”.* Gustav still proposed the motto *VINI VIDI VICI* - that was when we misspelled the first part.”  
(Potgieter Pen: A small garden built by the troops in memory of a fallen comrade, Cpl J.L. Potgieter.)

Albert Snyman recalls: “*Gert and his comrades were the artistic officers among us during that time. The rest of us were better with serving drinks and doing the barbequing.*”

RSM Kobus Kemp recalls: *“When we started to work on the shoulder flashes late in 1986 we acted in breach of the dress regulation code. But it was the way we did things in Bravo Coy – just do it and apologise later. Unfortunately the flashes were too late for Bravo Coy 1986 but Bravo Coy 1987 could reap the benefits. Dawid Lotter, Ben Smit and I were so proud of the full company, wearing this striking shoulder flash.”*

### **The Bravo Coy Banner**

As the first permanent Bravo Coy since 1982, Bravo Coy 1986 took on the project to design the first sub-sub unit banner.

After considering various designs the following was decided: The Banner must be in the same shape as that used by the Roman legions, therefore wide at the top and sloping towards the bottom. It should not be able to flap in the wind, therefore anchored at the top and bottom. The central theme should only display the Bravo Coy emblem. It must be edged by a golden tassel seam. Small flags, representing each sub-sub unit, must be attached at the bottom of the banner. The crown on top of the carrier frame must be a sword. The carrier frame, on which the banner would be mounted, must dismantle easily for packaging to the battlefield.

2Lt Arie Arnold of the 81mm Mortar Platoon was seconded to go on a two week holiday at his parents' house in Cape Town. He had to get the banner made and indeed returned with a masterpiece!

There were however a few errors. The three infantry platoon flags incorrectly stated Pl 1, Pl 2 and Pl 3 instead of Pl 4, Pl 5 and Pl 6. We decided to live with it. At the same time Bravo Coy made a deliberate attempt to cover the company lines with calcrete. Street name boards were put up and the urinal system was updated. The banner was officially used for the first time to inaugurate the newly renovated tent lines. A special display cabinet to display the banner was kept in the Bravo Coy office.



The most noteworthy exposure of the banner was on 31 May 1986, during the Republic day celebrations in Oshakati. Bravo Coy provided the troops and Ratels. WO1 Kemp formed us up early. The officials and guests-of-honour already took up their places and at this critical moment WO1 Kemp started our “gate-crashing” banner parade. This was contrary to the rules and planning of this national parade! We did not want to push our luck too far so the banner was basically marched on, followed by a small hand-over ceremony to the banner carrying Ratel.

Later in the day I was on the red carpet regarding the “extra” ceremony. My excuse was that it was just a

tradition that the sub unit banner first needed to be ceremoniously unfurled – before participation in any other parade. I think they did not believe me but WO1 Kemp and I got away with only a light reprimand. This reprimand was however a bit tongue-in-cheek. Col Swart already knew me from earlier days and knew that I sometimes acted outside the boundaries – but never really caused any damage. We were therefore probably the first sub unit ever in the Sector 10 history where a sub unit parade preceded a national parade!

The banner was ceremoniously presented at all Bravo Coy affairs hereafter – and if there was no opportunity, Bravo Coy just marched around the parade ground, following the banner to the beat of marching music, just for fun.

Koos Cronje recalls: “We were very proud *when we went on parade with our banner for the first time in 1986. We used every opportunity thereafter to display it and the other sub units were extremely envious.*”

### **The Oath**

Bravo Coy 1987 was sworn in during a ceremony in January 1987. I hoped that the tradition would take hold and be carried forward but the war and other factors prevented it.

Therefore this taking-of-the-oath ceremony was held both for the first and the last time in 1987.



With the oath the whole Bravo Coy pledged their allegiance to 61 Mech Bn Gp. The attached symbolism was: First commemorate fallen comrades, then the unit. The leader group was first to solemnly pledge the oath, individually and in sub-sub unit groups. They did so while kneeling on their combat helmets in front of Cmdt Smit. As soon as each person completed the oath they were touched with the banner.



The leader group then returned to their lined up sub-sub units where the oath was carried further. It was followed by a march past and salute to Cmdt Smit on the podium next to the memorial needle. I cannot remember

the precise words anymore but it had the following element: Loyalty to the Fatherland, the Unit and the Sub unit.

### **The Officers Ring**

The tradition of the Bravo Coy officers ring had its inception in 1987.

A ring was made for each officer of Bravo Coy. The symbolism pointed to that of an emperor's ring. Accordingly the emperor pressed his unique seal into hot wax at the bottom of a document. This then made the document official. Similar rings were also worn by the emperor's governors. With planning of the ring the following requirements were set: It must be made of silver to reflect purity, as referred to in Psalm 66:10: "For You have proved us, O God; You have tested us, as silver is refined." It must be worn on the ring finger, left or right. The ring finger is the symbol of creativity and truth according to tradition.



The ring therefore represents purity of heart, creative thinking and truth. Only eight of these rings were made – one for Cmdt Smit and seven others for the seven officers of Bravo Coy. The design and manufacture of the rings were done by the sister of 2Lt van Wyk (Pl 6). It was delivered just in time for handover during the clearing out parade of Bravo Coy 1987.



### **The Bravo Coy “Ouman” Staff**

Bravo Coy decided in 1987 to get an “Ouman” staff manufactured as a symbol of their “Ouman” status. (“Ouman” or “Oumanne” (plural) translate to “Old Man/Old Men” and the status was achieved when passing the traditional 40 days mark before clearing out of the army.)

The staff had to conform to the following specification: Each one must have a unique serial number. The head must be round and made of metal – thus symbolising the Bravo Coy firepower and combat ability. The 61 Mech Bn Gp emblem had to appear on the one side and the Bravo Coy emblem on the other.

The shaft linking the head and the base must be of a hard, precious wood. The balance point must be directly below the head to represent reaction speed and control. The base had to be strengthened with a metal shoe to confirm Bravo Coy's continued preparedness. It had to be a symbol of the motto: "Veni, Vidi, Vici".



Manufacturing of the "Ouman Staff" commenced. This was done by Mr Barry van Niekerk. The cost was partly covered by the members of Bravo Coy and partly by Mr van Niekerk. Some members could not afford the cost and therefore did not receive one. It was only issued to members of Bravo coy, with the exception of Cmdt Smit, RSM Kemp and selected members of 61 Mech Bn Gp. The initial idea was that the handover parade should coincide with the traditional "40 days" function.

Due to Ops Modulêr this could not happen though. The parade actually took place on 30 November 1987, near Mavinga. Maj Genl Meyer was invited to do the handover. The certificates were already printed when it transpired that he could not attend the ceremony due to



other commitments. I then personally sent an invite to Dr Savimbi to do the handover. Due to his vulnerability so close to Mavinga he sent his Chief of Staff - Logistics, Genl J Bock, to do the handover on his behalf. The consignment was packaged in ammunition crates at Tsumeb and then delivered to the front by RSM Kemp. Once there, Ben Smit placed it under strict custody until the handover date.

Due to the numbering of the staffs it was difficult to determine who would receive which staff. I reserved number 1 for myself. The rest were made to stand upright in the soft sand; in the format of 3 rank line-ups in the sub-sub unit order. Due to the fact that Genl Bock only had one arm it would have been difficult for him to receive it from me first, before handing it over.



Ben Smit formed up the parade and marched them to their positions behind the staffs. Cmdt Smit received his staff from me first. Then Genl Bock, accompanied by Cmdt Smit and myself, moved through the ranks and handed the staff to each member. All the other sub units

were invited to be spectators.

Genl Bock thanked the SADF for their contribution, with a special word of thanks to each individual soldier. His message was that those that were about to return to South Africa should not forget those that remained behind. The world-play implied: those that will continue fighting and those that paid the highest price in the war.



### **Ratel Names**

In the beginning of 1986 Cmdt Smit initiated a project to assign names to all the combat vehicles. His recommendation was that the Ratel 20s should be named after previous commanders of 61 Mech Bn Gp.

After deliberation we decided on the following: The Ratel 20s would be named after known infantry combat vehicles of the world and the Ratel 90s after famous tank battles. Some of the names were: Rommel (20), Marder (20A), AMX10, Saviem, Spartan, Saracen, Commando, War Chariot, Cabrai, Bulge, Kursk, Tobruk and Brevity.

## **Omuthiya Special**

The Omuthiya Special was not unique to Bravo Coy. It originated somewhere between 1982 and 1983 as incorporation ceremony of a new leader group.

The leader group had to “earn” their stay in the East Base through this ceremony. It involved the drinking of an alcoholic brew. The history of the Omuthiya Special was not overly glorious. A corporal of the previous year came close to death due to alcohol poisoning. During 1987 Ben and I decided that we should at least control it and it was therefore converted into a ceremony.



The various sub-sub unit leader groups of Bravo Coy were all marched in by Ben. They were then ordered to drink the brew from specially engraved beer mugs, followed by a formal signing of the Omuthiya Clubhouse register. Ben and I then later ensured that each one got to their respective sleeping quarters. The uncontrolled ceremonies of the other sub units took its normal toll. As far as I remember the Bravo Coy leader group only woke up with a severe headache the next morning.

Jaco Swanevelder recalls: *“The Omuthiya Special ceremony was preceded by a “welcoming”, specifically for the NCOs. We were subjected to an information session (good and proper) by our "oumanne", as well as a flag raising ritual, where a pink ladie’s G-string had to remind us of what we would miss for the next year. Then the ceremony took place. The concoction consisted of a tot of all types of hard liquor in the Country Club. The Advocaat liqueur ruined the whole Special in my opinion! The Special then had to be chased with a warm Longtom Black Label beer. For some or other reason the potentially deadly concoction did not have an immediate effect on Schreuder and I. What I remember further is highly debatable. The beer mugs in which the Omuthiya Specials were served were also specially engraved to commemorate the occasion.”*

The Omuthiya Special cured a couple of blokes from the “great thirst” for a long time. It was not a good practice, in my opinion.

### **The Hastati Munch**

The Hastati Munch was part of the Bravo Coy Roman tradition.

The meal had to be eaten with the fingers, without any utensils, and wine was the only beverage. The guests-of-honour was the 61 Mech Bn HQ staff. Dress code included orange tablecloths as draped uniforms for the officers and brown bed sheets for other ranks.



Laurel wreaths were made from the twigs of local Mopani trees. Cmdt Smit took up his place at the entrance of the mess hall as main Centurion and all “guests” then had to come and greet him.

His words would be: “Lend me thine ears”, and he would then touch the guest’s ear. It only worked for the first ten guests or so and then he just let them flock in. The meal was opened with the marching in of the Bravo Coy banner followed by singing of the Hastati song. Then only could the feast begin in all earnest.

Too much wine makes any Roman riotous and it wasn’t long before the men started a food fight. The feast however continued till much later. Cleaning up the next morning was a challenge on its own!



### **The Way We Sang**

My first command post was with Echo Coy, 1 SAI Bn in 1981, just back from the Military Academy – where you had to sing, whether you liked it or not.

I then did my own composition based on the German Pantzersong. It was not sung much in 1981 but it came more into its own right in 1983 with Alpha Coy, 1 SAI Bn. It was sung frequently in 1986 and 1987. Sometimes the song was referred to as the Mech Song but it was never sung wider than troops under my command.

### **The Song of the Mechanised Infantry (Tune - “Das Panzerlied”) Composition – Dawid Lotter**

In storm of sneeu of die bakkende son,  
(In storm or snow or baking sun,)

in gloeiende dae of in yskoue nag.  
(in glowing days or ice cold night.)

Vol stof in ons gesigte  
(Full of dust in our faces)

Tog hoog in onse gees - ja gees (2x)  
(Still high in our spirit – yes spirit (2x))

Dit stu onse Ratels na voor onbevrees.  
(It propels our Ratels forward without fear)

Met Ratels, soldate, 'n toonbeeld van krag.  
(With Ratels, soldiers, a paragon of power)

Hou ons al die eer van die Weermag in pag.  
(We keep all the honour of the Army in trust.)

Vir Land en Volk en Vaderland,  
(For Country and Nation and Fatherland,)

Is ons die Ratel Meg - ja Meg (2x)  
(We are the Ratel Mech - yes Mech (2x))

En vir ons eer sal ons altyd bly veg.  
(And we will always fight for our honour.)

This song was last sung in 1987 where after it fell into disuse.

### **The Hastati Song**

As conclusion to the Hastati Munch I slightly adapted the following song from an old record. I cannot remember the original composer or lyric writer. The Hastati is defined as follows: “Hastati (singular: Hastatus) were a class of

infantry in the armies of the early Roman Republic who originally fought as spearmen and later as swordsmen”.

### **The Song of the Hastati**

Ons is dapper helde  
(We are brave heroes)

Vol oorwinningskrag  
(Full of conquering power)

Volg steeds in die spore  
(Still following the footsteps)

Van die vyandsmag  
(Of the enemy force)

Om hul te vernietig  
(To destroy them)

Waar hul mag vernag  
(Where they might stay overnight)

Ons is glad nie bang nie  
(We are not afraid)

Steeds vol heldemoed  
(Still full of hero's courage)

Voorwaarts is die roepstem van die Ha-sta-ti  
(Forwards is the call of the Ha-sta-ti)

Ons sal veg vir jou Suid Afrika (2X)  
(We will fight for you South Africa (2x))



## CHAPTER 4

### INDUCTION 1987

This CHAPTER deals with the clearing out of Bravo Coy 1986 and the arrival of Bravo Coy 1987. Those first weeks at Omuthiya formed the foundation for a long year.

#### The Arrival

Bravo Coy 1986 missed the battles of 1987 although they were prepared. The test of Bravo Coy only came in 1987 with Ops Modulêr.

Koos Cronje recalls: *“When we cleared out at the end of 1986, without firing a single shot at the enemy, we didn’t feel so good about it. We were tightly wound up for action but nothing happened. Many of us were disappointed. It was probably arrogant or irresponsible to think like that, but I attributed it to the indifference of our youth at that stage.”*

The Bravo Coy members were eagerly looking forward to the arrival of the new Bravo Coy for 1987. It meant it was close to their time to clear out, but there were also lots of planning among members about induction or initiation of the new members. Due to the fact that I got to know my troops over the past year I anticipated problems and therefore made a deal with them. They could fetch the new Bravo Coy at the tar road and bring them into the base. At the base they could look them over and read them the riot act. No one was however allowed to touch any new troop for the duration.



The total initiation continued for about an hour. Thereafter it was done. Luckily I had a couple of troops that had to remain behind due to “extra days”. I used them as examples of what would happen if any further initiation took place. If I heard of any initiation it would be a matter of detention. Although I expected isolated incidents nothing was reported.

Paul Ronge recalls: *“The old company appeared to be a rough bunch. We however did not allow them to mess with us, even though we were bush-rookies. My “ouman” and I naturally got along just fine. He even gave me his cravat. But there was an incident in our tent - Cpl Kobus Pieters whacked one of the “oumanne” because he made such a fracas on the night when they shot flares all over the base.”*

Pieter Prinsloo recalls: *“The bunch of “oumanne” that awaited us were rather strange. More strange however, was the redhead with the Livingstone cap, the Ritmeester cigar and the ominous look in his eyes. He was*

*waiting for us at the end of the run from the tar road to the camp.”*

Stelios Moraites recalls: *“We stopped at the white road and this bunch of dirty, faded troops, wearing “vellies”, started shouting and ranting at us. They told off our poor lieutenant (Du Preez) fairly badly in my opinion. As I was probably very hard-assed it didn’t bother me much though. The Churchill speech was impressive, to say the least, but I really thought our Major was a bit of a clown at that time!”*

(Vellies: traditional South African shoes with rawhide uppers, leather footbed and rubber sole.)

Dawid Momberg recalls: *“In the beginning of December we flew to Grootfontein with the “flossies” (C130 or C160 cargo planes). From Grootfontein we were carted to Omuthiya with big, white trucks. At the turn-off to the base we were told to get off and to line up. Then we had to run to the base in our platoons. The “ouman” troops were really making a big noise. It was apparently tradition that the “oumanne” received the new troops like that. Personally I thought it was just a lot of crap. Then this red-headed Major arrived and strolled up and down in front of the company - not saying a word. And he looked extremely grumpy. Suddenly he says: “I am Major Dawid Hermanus Lotter from Klerksdorp. Klerksdorp is on the map because I’m coming from there.” My first thought was: “Sh\_t, and now we’re getting a crazy Major!”*

## **The Last of Bravo Company 1986**

The new Bravo Coy was cleared in at Omuthiya. For the old Bravo Coy all that was left was a final parade, taking place on the Tsumeb rugby field, followed by a Gala evening in the school hall.

The new leader group of Bravo Coy 1987 attended. I did not even think about it but Cmdt Smit ordered me to hastily fetch them at Omuthiya. The vehicle however developed mechanical problems. When they arrived their tunics were smeared with diesel stains. 2Lt Kooij, especially, did not appear very “fresh”.



With the farewell function in the school hall finished, as last ceremony, Bravo Coy started flying back the next day. During the ceremony Bravo Coy 1986 won all awarded trophies (eight or nine), excluding the Fire Fighting trophy. The whole company sat on the gallery and sang the Mech Song with great enthusiasm, the best ever.

## **Christmas 1986**

Christmas 1986 was both a cheerful and sad day. The kitchen and 61 Mech Ladies Association put in a lot of effort to create a festive atmosphere - but everyone still longed for home.

The evening before Christmas Bravo Coy got together in the shower complex to practice Christmas hymns. The singing ability of the members was rather poor and the corrugated iron walls of the building did not help the acoustics much. We were however slightly better prepared to sing together as a group.



We lead the singing during the Christmas service on 25 December. The service was held under the tank shed and the Olifant tanks were shifted out to create space, with the exception of two or three that couldn't be moved. These large iron monsters gave quite a special character to the service.

The service was followed by a Christmas meal in the mess hall. It was one of those extremely hot Ovambo

summer days. That was a Thursday and we started training in all earnest on the Friday already.



### **Potjiekos and Barbeque**

On New Year's Eve the leader group had a potjiekos (literally "small pot food", where a whole meal is cooked in one cast iron pot) competition in the East Base while the troops held a barbeque.



### **Issuing Equipment**

Bravo Coy maintained well organised and strict equipment awareness.

At the end of 1986 the total loss was R1.98 after a years' worth of training. I think it was a lost screwdriver or something. Sgt Hans Swartz received a well organised store from the 1986 group. Issuing of equipment started in all earnest. Ratels were thoroughly cleaned, mounted weapons were shot in and by early January 1987 I invited Cmdt Smit for an inspection. As far as equipment was concerned Bravo Coy was declared combat ready.



Periodic stable parades were held throughout the year. Apart from our manpower our equipment was our

biggest asset and we maintained it appropriately. Everybody quickly learned that you would pay if you waste or mess up.

Pieter Prinsloo recalls: *“My number 14 L-wrench got lost once. Because of a nearing stable parade I contacted my mother to procure one and to get it to me in the fastest way possible. My dear mother could organise and my equipment was complete by the time of the stable parade!”*





## **CHAPTER 5**

### **TRAINING HARD**

This CHAPTER deals with the training that Bravo Coy was subjected to. It is not in strict chronological order. The orientation training is discussed first, followed by the smaller aspects of Bravo Coy training. The 61 Mech Bn Gp training exercises, in which the whole combat group participated, are discussed last.

#### **Orientation Training**

Training was a continuous process. We could distinguish the different facets but they could not be separated. One new skill flowed into the next. By the time Bravo Coy arrived at 61 Mech Bn Gp at the beginning of December 1986 they already had nearly a years' worth of training.

At 1 SAI Bn they went through all the training phases of being a soldier. They were prepared gradually with basics-, individual-, team-, section-, platoon- and company training. That was followed finally by combat team and combat group exercises where they learned to work along with other service groups.

The Anti-Tank group received training at the School of Armour and the Mechanised Leader Wing. This training took place at De Brug and Lohathla (Army Battle School). Experience however taught that a conversion training phase was necessary for all new sub units in Ovamboland.



Terrain, climate and conditions were totally different from that at De Brug and Lohathla. The deep sand and dense bush at Omuthiya posed unique challenges – driving, navigation, deployment and replenishment, to name a few. Previously learnt drills like fish boning, actions ahead, left and right, pulling into a laager, replenishments and more had to be adapted to suit the different conditions.

Training started with the compulsory Counter Insurgency (COIN) training at Sector 10 Training Unit at Oshivelo. It was not offered by 61 Mech Bn Gp but was the task of the training unit. The philosophy was that all soldiers were a soldier first, and then only a specialist - like Mechanised Infantry, Anti-Tank, etc. He had to be able to be just as effective without a vehicle. In this COIN phase his skills, like bush craft, patrols, ambushes, etc. were sharpened again. He had to realize again that his R4 (assault rifle) was his primary weapon.

Most important of all – here they could view and handle different enemy weapons first hand.



Following evaluations of this phase, Pl 6 were selected as the best platoon for the night ambush since the inception of the training unit in 1980. It was a huge achievement. This phase was experienced with mixed feelings by Bravo Coy.

Pieter Prinsloo recalls: *“I could not understand that foot-soldier training. We basically just arrived when you chased us into the plains. Counter Insurgency training or something, I think. Although we couldn’t ask questions we could still think what we wanted; and I thought it was flipping stupid that a mechanised soldier had to walk on foot! It rained every evening, on top of everything else, and those darn bivvies were not overly waterproof.”*

Cornie Botes recalls: *“With that training it was the first time in my life that I had to stay awake right through the night and still keep going the next day. Then you realize that you can stay awake longer than you think.”*

John McCrum recalls: *“As for the foot soldier training at Oshivelo - it seemed to me that it rained every day for the entire time we were there. Staying dry was a big problem and keeping the rust off my weapon was very difficult. There were regular inspections on equipment and I covered my rifle with as much oil as I could find. I enjoyed the night ambush, I seem to remember we got very good marks for that.”*

Stelios Moraites recalls: *“That first training was a lot different from that of ISAI Bn or Lohathla in the sense that it was a lot more realistic. I did my only camp in 1993 at Lohathla and had to show those young guys, who only did one year conscription, how to properly clear a trench. One of the commanders commented: “Heck, but you are aggressive in the trenches.” I am thankful for the valuable training we received before Modulêr - I was fully prepared for just about everything.”*

Paul Ronge recalls: *“I only learnt how to effectively use an M26 hand grenade during the retraining phase. It was as if the ISAI Bn instructors were overly cautious. I only learnt how to throw an M26 grenade into a trench from the outside at 61 Mech Bn Gp. And then, the best training I ever received during my entire stay in the army - instruction by you on the 60mm Patmor mortar. When we did the course during 3<sup>rd</sup> phase at ISAI Bn they taught us with safety as priority - if you shoot over the heads of your own troops, you shoot the maximum distance that the weapon was able to. It was you who taught me the self-confidence to land the bombs on the enemy effectively. There are many things that I remember better from the*

*retraining at 61 Mech Bn Gp rather than from the first year's training at ISAI Bn. Many of the guys complained but they realized, as the training progressed, that there were things they did not know before."*

Back at Omuthiya everybody was subjected to mechanised sharpening. Technical and tactical skills were tested and sharpened. A major aim was to prepare Bravo Coy psychologically for operational deployment. There wasn't a real enemy at De Brug and Lohathla. The biggest enemy was the instructor and whatever trick was up his sleeve next.

The area around Omuthiya, for a fair distance, was relatively safe. But it was still situated in the "Rooi Gebied" (Red Area, also called the Operational Area) and the possibility of SWAPO presence was always there. Omuthiya and the neighbouring training areas were excellent for exercising all phases of the conventional land battle. The advance over long distances could be performed as close to reality as a commander could wish for.

There were numerous prepared targets upon which every possible attack contingency could be practiced. If such a target did not exist, one was developed as part of the defence phase – just to attack it later on again.

The terrain was extremely suitable to refine mobile defence in all its facets. The return journey and the retreat movements of a force, by fighting backwards using stop lines, could similarly be exercised in detail. Realistic fire

fights could be simulated as there were very few restrictions on direction of fire. The training field was as close as possible to that of southern Angola, with the exception of water obstacles.

This, approximately 5 week phase, was very intensive and placed hard demands on man and machine. The incident that Henry Skinner experienced when his Ratel drove into an old trench was only one of numerous similar close calls. Training was realistic, for sure. This phase was completed by middle February 1987 and followed by a deliberate equipment maintenance and repair program.



Henry Skinner recalls: *“Those few weeks of intensive training were a period that any normal young man dreams off. We learned so much and I still remember the excitement of learning to operate with so many different units. I remember the Ratel incident and I was in really deep sh\_t. Quite a scary day...”*

Robert Torrani recalls: *“Van drove our Ratel into the trench sideways. I was standing out of the turret and I saw the trench coming alongside. I then just managed to get*

*into the turret when we went in. The Ratel started falling over. The spare wheel also came off and rolled past. If any of us were out, and got hit by that wheel, it could have gotten nasty.”*

John McCrum recalls: *“I was in the right-hand side of the Ratel (light machine gun (LMG) crew, next to the door) when 23C went into the trench. I ended up covered by hundreds of 7.62mm Browning rounds. I eventually managed to crawl out of the top hatch.”*

Jaco Swanevelder recalls: *“Ammunition was never an issue. I can’t remember who controlled the magazine, but we never had a problem requesting and receiving as much ammunition as we pleased. Several competitions were held to establish who could maintain the highest rate of fire per minute with the 90’s. I cannot remember which team was the fastest but both fire groups could maintain a rate of fire of between 6 and 8 rounds per minute. That also included a couple of linked belts of Browning ammunition. It was the recipe for an unbelievable amount of lead on any target.”*

The training was extremely realistic, as previously stated. 61 Mech Bn Gp was a high priority unit with very few restrictions regarding training support. That first retraining phase was seen as the most important. Bravo Coy could be deployed afterwards. However, every opportunity was also grasped to do retraining after completion of territorial operations.

## **Conversion of Platoon 6**

Due to the 81mm mortar platoon's affiliation with Alpha Coy it was not always possible to receive 81mm mortar support during training or territorial operations. To ensure realistic and safe exercises or deployments we needed to have good, accurate indirect fire support to be guaranteed.

To overcome this problem Pl 6 was converted for dual purpose application. The store was full of unused conventional 60mm mortar tubes and I decided that I wanted my own mortar fire group. Ben Smit, a capable mortarist himself, started with the conversion training.



Pl 6 would then be the internal, structured Bravo Coy mortar fire group. Their primary task was still to be the reserve of Combat Elements 1 and 2, but with a parallel task as my guaranteed mortars – which meant added responsibilities. Their excellent performance during the COIN phase proved them to be the correct platoon for the demanding task.

The combat element and 60mm mortar combinations



provided Bravo Coy with a lot of flexibility. This double purpose conversion would prove to be of great value later during Ops Modulêr. Their performance on 3 October, where accurate fire on the fleeing 47<sup>th</sup> Brigade had a definite influence, was testimony to this.

While they were still the reserve force in the mechanised infantry role, they could still apply their main weapons highly effectively over the flood plains of the Lomba River. With their arsenal of 60mm mortar rounds, fired from the conventional 60mm base-plate, they could deliver a large volume of accurate fire on the FAPLA infantry, busy escaping northwards. More about their performance later.

Paul Ronge recalls: *“The extra bombs didn’t bother me. I was the only crewmember that could lie down in the Call Sign 23 Ratel. I stacked my cases with bombs to the left of the turret, in such a manner that I could lie down comfortably while we were driving. I swopped the left-hand wire-cage from the driver for a tin of “Vienna’s in tomato” so I even had my own personal pantry for my rations the whole time.”*

### **Classification Shooting Range**

As the first part of the year went past it was clear that one aspect of the on-going training suffered some damage.

With all the weaponry and war toys we started forgetting about the basics of it all – the effective application of the personal weapon. Each soldier needed to

spend time on a classification shooting range from time to time to be able to adjust his own weapon and to test his ability against a measurable target. There were however no classification shooting range at Omuthiya or its surrounds.

Roelof van Wyk took the initiative to build a classification shooting range at Omuthiya that complied with the basic requirements. I think it was probably the only such range in the whole of the operational area. Pl 6 started building the range with great commitment. Roelof wanted to start working on the piece of slate that would display the name of the range. He wanted to call it the D.H. Lotter shooting range but I felt a bit hesitant about it. My opinion was that Cmdt Smit was more worthy to be named than I but Pl 6 was determined. It was a great honour. Roelof carved the name on the slate himself.

The range was officially opened with a ceremony. Cmdt Smit unveiled the slate name board with a speech and champagne. I think there was one, maybe two, shooting exercises on the range before we deployed for Ops Modulêr. Those exercises however allowed a couple of people to return to the basics of marksmanship – including myself!

Years later a number of people, that's been in 61 Mech Bn Gp at Omuthiya later on, were under the impression that I was killed in action and that the piece of slate was a memorial – maybe due to the fact that the piece of slate on top of a small cement pedestal looked like a gravestone!



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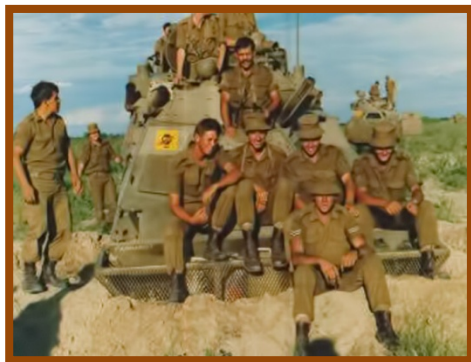
### **Trench Crossing**

The Ratel had a design restriction as far as trench crossing was concerned, especially deep trenches.

Its main traction was situated at the rear where four wheels could simultaneously provide traction. If the two front wheels fell into a deep trench the back lifted up and sufficient traction was lost. It then had to be hooked up and towed out by another Ratel – not something anyone wanted to experience when under enemy fire!

I designed a drill to circumvent the problem and presented the “backside-forward” application to Cmdt Smit. I believe it was unique to Bravo Coy 1987.

Although initially viewed with scepticism it was a drill born out of need. It was not necessarily the best way, but rather that than to be under enemy fire with a stuck Ratel.



The drill was as follow: Ratel 1 gets to an uncrossable trench and signals it through. Ratel 2 and 3 then get to the trench and provide fire support by speculative fire or a fire belt action, depending on the situation. Ratel 1 turns around with its rear end to the threat. Rear wheel traction brings it across the trench. It then turns around and takes over the fire support of Ratel 2. Ratel 2 turns with its rear end to the threat and Ratel 4 takes over its position. Ratel 2 crosses in the reverse position. 50% of the 4 Ratels are now busy with fire support. Ratel 3 and 4 can now also follow the drill with fire support from Ratels 1 and 2. This drill was later applied in Ops Modulêr. More about this later.

### **Unit Exercises**

Cmdt Smit had sufficient trust in his sub unit commanders not to continuously look over our shoulders. It was

however his right to do at least one combined training exercise with his battalion.

He specifically took control of the two infantry companies and Charlie Squadron during May 87. These exercises took place about 4km east of the Omuthiya base. We were trained regarding relief in the line and integration of A Coy, B Coy and C Sqn. Trench crossing and direct overhead fire also formed a large part. It is also here that Cpl Schutte got shot in the buttock.



61 Mech Bn Gp performed a unit exercise called Mobilate Vincere as the final conclusion to its training phase. This was during May 1987. I suspected that Cmdt Smit already knew we would deploy before the end of the year. The exercise included an advance to the forward assembly area. Several targets were then attacked with all available weapons. It was also during this time that we got to do with the G6 (155mm calibre self-propelled howitzer) for the first time. The force exploited to approximately 20km north of Omuthiya and then took up mobile defence positions towards the south. It was an extremely realistic

exercise and contained all the features applied later on during Ops Modulêr.

Robert Torrani recalls: *“At a stage during the training with the G6’s and our Ratels, we had driven all night and all of the next day. The following night when the G6’s fired out of the laager, Van (my driver) and I did not even wake. We were only told the following day (by troops who had such a fright that they stood straight up in their sleeping bags) that the G6’s had fired.”*



Pieter Prinsloo recalls: *“I was extremely upset when the G6 crew told me to relocate my sleeping spot. But later during the night, extremely happy again when they started shooting and I experienced the recoil force and dust clouds.”*

### **Fitness**

Over and above the normal exhaustive training activities the emphasis on fitness was never neglected at Bravo Coy.

The 2.4km was run as prescribed right up to deployment for Modulêr.

**Chief of the Army Fitness Evaluation:** There was also the Head of the Army Fitness Evaluation that involved a 25km route march with backpack and rifle. This was done on the white calcrete road to Tsintsabis. Everyone had to do it, even the company commander. Only 10km was required for those over 30 years of age. Being just over 30 it therefore provided me with the opportunity to finish a bit early. The time was used to verify the preparations at the finish line. I could also drive back on the route to encourage the men – using marching music and verbal motivation. We had a fire at the finish line with something on the coals but, as usual, the men were so tired that they did not eat much.



I ensured that there was a beer for the first lot but can't remember if the stragglers also got some. I do remember lots of blisters on feet though and the medic was ready with his syringe - replacing the fluid in a blister with Methyolite. It worked wonders.

Jaco Swanevelder recalls: *“I walked the 25km together with Johan Kooij. I had to give 3 steps to every one of his to keep up! At a stage, around the 15km mark, my army issue jockstrap started chafing me so badly that I just tore it off my body and threw it in the bushes! The hike made a lot of guys end up in the sickbay for the feared Methyolite treatment for blisters. I think the Medics derived some sadistic pleasure from this procedure!”*

**Road Relay:** We participated in the annual road relay from Omuthiya to Tsumeb. It was a 61 Mech Bn Gp tradition transferred from 1986. It consisted of 5km relays with the finish line on the rugby field in Tsumeb.



**Bundle Sports:** We also participated in the 61 Mech Bn Gp bundle sports day, also held on the Tsumeb rugby field. All the sub units had to enter teams and it was a unit day full of fun, laughter and play.





**Platoon Competition:** There was a platoon competition where the Bravo sub-sub units competed against each other. It entailed the following: running an obstacle course to the north of the Omuthiya base; crossing a wire fence; running a route outside the fence towards the south of the base; crossing back over the fence; through a trench and on to the finish line. Every sub-sub unit had to carry a predetermined load like wooden poles or tires.



**Tug of War:** For a bit of variation we had tug of war competitions between sub-sub units and HQ. It was fun until the Bravo Coy team did so well that they had to compete at the SWA championships. I drew the line there, though. I had too much trouble during the 1 SAI Bn and Askari days with under strength platoons due to rugby and other sports. When HQ wanted to force the issue I had a personal talk with all the members, including Anton Pretorius. There is a time for sports and there is a time for war. Tug of war championships did not fall in the last category.



**Fitness during Modulêr:** We even promoted fitness deep inside enemy territory during Ops Modulêr.



Somewhere in late September 61 Mech Bn Gp was in a laager area about 20km south west of Mavinga. A circle route was laid out around it and all sub units were warned about the activity. Each sub unit entered their members and the race began.

## Debrief

When considering the intensive training Bravo Coy was subjected to before joining Modulêr, we have to think twice before criticising the performance of our comrades that came after us to join Ops Hooper.

They arrived directly from De Brug and Lohathla and were as raw as when Bravo Coy first arrived. They did not land at Omuthiya but got directly involved as Modulêr was concluded and Hooper started. There was no orientation for the leader group or the troops.

Upon landing at Mavinga they were expected to enter battle immediately and were expected to know what was required. They had to learn lessons under combat conditions that Bravo Coy learned systematically over a period of months. They had to perform integration drills with sub units they had never seen or did not even know off.

Bravo Coy started as a goldfish in a bowl. As we grew we were moved to a bigger bowl. Then only were we let loose between the sharks. They ended up among the sharks immediately. I am very thankful that our sequence of events was as described here – and not the way they had to learn from actual experiences.

Regarding the training of the Roman Legions: *“Their drills are bloodless battles, and their battles bloody drills.” Flavius Josephus.*

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **TERRITORIAL DEPLOYMENTS**

This part deals with the deployments of Bravo Coy inside Ovamboland, as support for the Sector 10 - Oshakati combat design. The goals of these deployments were the same as that of Ops Vasvat, Ops Nekomdraai (1984), Ops Pronkertjie and Ops Viper (1985). The purpose was to create a positive attitude among the local population towards the SADF. It also acted as shows-of-force and securing of the territory.

#### **Ruacana**

Our first territorial deployment was to 51 Bn at Ruacana. It was meant as a show-of-force operation.

Ruacana was a little town that primarily housed government officials and SWAWEK (South West Africa Water and Electricity Corporation). Ruacana developed due to the presence of a large underground hydro-electrical plant. This plant was connected to a nearby dam across the border in Angola at Calueque. 51 Bn was assigned as protection unit for this project.

It was a short deployment with a dual purpose. Firstly we had to make the inhabitants feel more comfortable and secondly to show the Angolans that we are there to protect our interests.



In 1986 the whole of Bravo Coy drove down into the power station. Going down the 800m tunnel was one of the highlights of our visit, even though turning around with the vehicles brought some challenges of its own. Unfortunately I could not get similar permission for Bravo Coy 1987. The men could however walk in and view the underground plant.

Unfortunately the Ruacana falls, unlike the case with Bravo Coy 86, were bone dry. We had a barbeque and returned back to 61 Mech Bn Gp.



## **Ombalantu I**

Bravo Coy deployed to one of the 52 Bn company bases at Ombalantu on 25 February. It was surrounded by soil embankments and less than 100m from a Koevoet base.

At midday on 26 February 1987 Bravo Coy formed a separate, closed laager, about 200m outside a base of 101 Bn. Capt Ben Venter was the company commander of the 101 Bn company. We would start with patrols the next day.

During my liaison visit to the base there was a palpable feeling of unease. I deduced that the CSM insulted some of his Ovambo troops. It was their matter and Bravo Coy continued with replenishments and its late afternoon routine. Fernando Almeida was busy preparing a chicken for my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday at my Ratel. The next moment all hell broke loose in the company base. Shots were fired at us from the base and the Bravo Coy diesel bunker received a few glancing shots. The Koevoet base also started firing.

Fernando responded swiftly. He pushed me over where I sat on my camping chair and dived in to physically cover me, weapon at the ready. I immediately inquired about Ben Venter on the radio. I had to call repeatedly before he replied. When he ultimately responded his message was: "I think you need to rather move further away from the base." I gave the necessary instructions to Bravo Coy. When we were ready to move I informed Ben and could hear exited voices in the background.

His words were: “Do not withdraw; my troops are busy kicking down the door to the command bunker.” I was surprised and confused, and asked him to repeat the message. He confirmed that his troops were planning to throw hand grenades through the shooting tower of the bunker. I moved immediately and entered the base with a platoon. Ovambo soldiers fled in all directions over the embankments. Fernando entered the bunker and unfortunately disarmed the wrong person (Ben Venter)! The situation was brought under control and we occupied the base.

Cmdt Willie Welgemoed of 101 Bn was already on his way from Ondangwa and I think he arrived around 23:00. It would have been an embarrassment for any commander when another unit had to intervene to restore discipline in one of his bases. There was also the question of the escaped Ovambo troops – it did not sit well with them that Ratels occupied their base! Cmdt Welgemoed requested me to withdraw from the base and we did so the same night.

### **Oshikango**

Our deployment to Oshikango, like all Bravo Coy territorial deployments, had the goal of supporting the local population, with the main purpose of demonstrating presence and a show-of-force.

Upper command still strived to influence the traditional Ovambo rural areas positively towards the SADF. It was unsuccessful but today we can at least say

we tried.



We visited a few of the many “kraals” (traditional enclosed villages) in the surrounding area during this deployment. We also split up in teams and maintained a web of activity over a wide area. Elementary medical assistance was provided, information was gathered and we searched for SWAPO stowaways.



10 Armour was busy with similar operations at the same time and in the same area. They visited a kraal and wanted to search one of the huts, after talking to the



headman. Two troops went to the corrugated iron hut. When they opened the door one was shot in the face and the other shot dead through the window. The other troops ran back to their armoured vehicles and then shot up the whole kraal. Bravo visited the scene. I think we realized afterwards, things might look quiet – but the enemy is everywhere.

Jaco Swanevelder recalls: *“During this deployment we (Call Sign 71) were sent out one morning to investigate a shooting at a kraal or cuca-shop. Upon arrival we find this young Ovambo who was apparently shot during a quarrel. The murderer was nowhere to be found. Our instructions were to take the body to the closest police office. My driver, Le Roux, was not very impressed when I gave instructions to put the body in the isle next to the Ratel engine, rather than on top of the vehicle. The man was shot in the head and still bleeding a lot. We did not have a body bag for some obscure reason and the result was an isle full of blood by the time we reached the police.”*

(Cuca-shop: a local informal shop, typically also selling alcohol.)

### **Ondangwa**

Bravo Coy deployed to the Ondangwa air force base, based on rumours of a possible attack.

It did not involve much excitement and we passed the time by playing volleyball and by being at the ready. The most important event was that we “redeemed” a “soft serve” machine from the base. It ended up in the Bravo

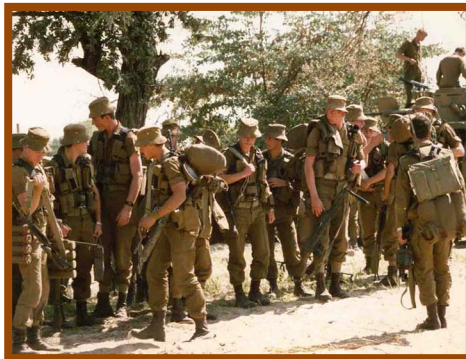
Coy tuck shop.



### **Ogongo**

Our deployment to Ogongo was as fighting force support to an SACC (South African Coloured Corps) company.

It was just after a quarrel between the SACC people where knife stabbings occurred. Sector 10 was concerned about the level of readiness of the Ogongo base.



It was a very peaceful deployment. Capt Maasdorp

and S/Sgt Arnoldus put in a lot of effort to make our stay pleasant.



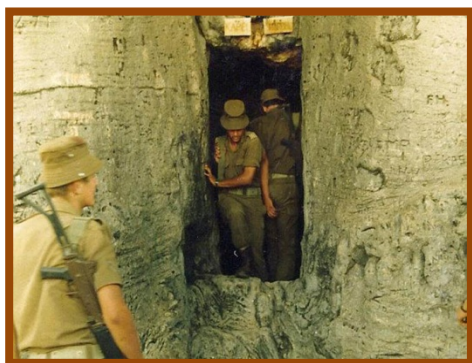
It was here that we attended one of the most striking church services. The base chaplain selected a text from Psalm 91: “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” The sermon was concluded with the singing of Psalm 100. The harmonious voices were remarkable.

Bravo Coy did a few patrols but the area was quiet.

## **Ombalantu II**

This deployment can be seen as the first phase of Modulêr. We were deployed directly at the main Ombalantu base, following the incident with the mutiny of the 101 BN company on 26 February.

The interesting thing about this base was that it had an enormous baobab tree with a small chapel in its trunk. It had space for a small pulpit and seating for seven.



We did a lot of Ratel patrols here and it was then that a crazy plan came into my mind to “get a bit lost” and to pay a quick visit to Angola. The Ombalantu intelligence officer showed me the UNITA bases on the map and then I planned my “getting lost”. It was the same day that 22B hit a landmine. I went past first and then crossed the Angola border. The rest followed. SWAPO must have planted the mine in the time since the first elements and I crossed the place. During later analysis it appeared that it was a double cheese mine. Luckily we did not have any losses apart from the Ratel.

Warren Sheridan recalls: *“There were 6 Ratels which missed the mine. Ratel 22B was 7th in line. Ratel 22 was in front of 22B. I was standing out from the turret looking back because of the dust. There was a 90mm who was not following in our tracks when 22B hit the mine. The first thing that went through my mind was that the 90mm had shot 22B and in the moment I couldn’t understand why. I jumped out of the turret and ran on top of the Ratel towards the back. I was just about to jump off when I realised that it was a mine. I therefore jumped off onto our*

*tracks, to avoid possible anti-personnel mines, and ran back to 22B to help where I could."*



Dreyer van Niekerk recalls: *"The Tiffie vehicle was the closest to us that day when "Bravo Boom" hit the landmine. Those guys were out of their vehicle and deployed battle ready around 22B while Staff Klopper aided the rest of us to get out. I was the last to leave the Ratel. My hatch could not open due to the 20mm in position above it."*

(Tiffie: military vehicle mechanic, performing servicing, repairs and recovery.)

The "getting lost" across the border also had its own excitement. We drove into a UNITA base and after the initial stressful uncertainty passed we took some photos. The UNITA's were a bit hungry and we gave them our ration packs. We then "got lost" back across the border to investigate the landmine story. The tracks where we crossed the border were found the next day and I had to explain it to Cmdt Pale van der Walt – a large man with a vicious temper. I stuck with the "getting lost" story and

got away with only a reprimand.



### **Bittersoet I**

In May 1987 it was clear that FAPLA planned a large operation against Mavinga. The first SADF liaison team deployed with UNITA on 14 May.

An appreciation of the situation was carried out and five FAPLA Brigades were identified. Savimbi requested assistance against the large numbers of FAPLA tanks. Approval was granted for the deployment of Special Forces, as a tank destroying force, by the end of May. By 11 June approval was granted to prepare 61 Mech Bn Gp.

The unit would however only deploy when absolutely necessary and as a last resort. During June 61 Mech Bn Gp was deployed on an eight day operation around Oshakati. The purpose was show-of-force and it was hoped that the movements would be reported to FAPLA. The unit left for the Bittersoet training area at Rundu for further show-of-force.



Cmdt Smit and the 61 Mech command group participated in five days of planning at Rundu. It became clear that 61 Mech would probably become involved in the operation. Higher HQ wanted to keep 61 Mech at Bittersoet but Cmdt Smit reasoned that proper maintenance could not be performed at Bittersoet. We then returned to Omuthiya for proper maintenance, stacking and packing plans.

### **Debrief**

In this first part we covered the history of Bravo Coy and ATk from their arrival at Omuthiya to the pre phase of Ops Modulêr.

The second part will describe the history of the Bravo Coy and ATk Pl participation in Ops Modulêr.

## **PART II: SEPTEMBER TO DECEMBER 1987 - OPERATION MODULÊR**

### **CHAPTER 7**

#### **PRE PHASE**

##### **Bittersoet II**

32 Bn deployed to Mavinga on 4 August and established their HQ at the Ingwe River, just east of the UNITA Logistics base. In an order group on 14 August it was confirmed that 61 Mech Bn Gp would only be deployed when the fall of Mavinga would become inevitable. In the meantime the progress of the FAPLA brigades was slowed by SADF artillery and mortars but by 16 August it was clear that 61 Mech Bn Gp had to enter the fighting.

The 61 Mech Bn Gp command group was involved in the detailed planning at Rundu. The unit was deployed to Bittersoet twice and there we had to be ready to advance at short notice. Cmdt Smit and his command group flew in to the forward HQ at the Ingwe River for information sessions. As part of the trip we also did a bit of reconnaissance with a Kwêvoël truck up to the source of the Mianei River. We then flew back to Rundu.

Four FAPLA brigades simultaneously started moving southwards from the Quito Bridge on 17 August. On 26 August Special Forces damaged the bridge at the rear of



the brigades. With the brigades cut off, FAPLA had to perform some emergency repairs in haste. All replenishments to the brigades south of the bridge had to be transported across by ferry and helicopter.

By 28 August two FAPLA brigades were within 4km of the Lomba River. On 29 August the G5's (155mm calibre towed howitzers) were flown in. The restrictions on 61 Mech Bn Gp were lifted at the same time. The combined, larger force would be known as 20 Brigade (Bde) from then on but it was calculated that this force would not be operational before 6 September. However, both 47 and 59 Bde's were at, and south of the Lomba River by 31 August. All RSA force deployments were speeded up. Hannes Northmann with the 32 Bn Anti-Tank Sqn reached the front that same night. On 2 September Cmdt Smit flew to the Bde HQ for planning.

### **From Rundu to Mavinga**

The restriction on deployment of 61 Mech was lifted on 29 August and we left Bittersoet to reach Mavinga at best speed.

We crossed the border at Rundu on 1 September under the command of Maj Danie Laas (61 Mech - 2 IC). We moved in packets of sub units to be less vulnerable from air attacks. It would also have made it difficult for the enemy to determine our strength. Maj Laas with the navigation vehicle was in front, marking the route, and the rest of us followed. The Ratels took the rough terrain with relative ease, but for other variants of vehicles following

in the deep tracks, there were some challenges.



Ben Smit recalls: *“On the way to Luenge, the Tiffies had to recover a Rinkhals ambulance. They used a kinetic rope, connected to a Withings recovery vehicle. This resulted in the undercarriage of the Rinkhals remaining in the riverbed, while the body landed on the river bank.”*

The ATk Pl (71 and 72) was one of the last packets to leave Bittersoet, followed by the 61 Mech echelon. They lost the marked route due to the many tracks crisscrossing it. They had little choice but to take their own route directly to Mavinga.

Theuns Cloete recalls: *“We started with the advance on Monday. Our route was Leghoha – Lowengo – 100km to Kandombe – 20km to Longende – 30km to Kampembe – 50km to Mavinga. We got stuck a lot and sometimes had to connect 4 Ratels in series to get one Ratel out. We drove for long hours – day and night, with only short periods of sleep. On Sunday we were within 35km from Mavinga.”*

Jaco Swanevelder recalls: *“On the way to Mavinga and the Lomba the Anti-Tank Platoon got stuck a bit due to track discipline that was observed down to the finest track pattern. Not having kinetic ropes or Tiffies, it took us nearly 5 hours to get out of this precarious situation.”*



Our main force reached the Luenge forward refuelling point on 2 September. At Luenge we could not refuel due to a brush fire that destroyed the diesel reserves the previous night. The available fuel was contaminated. We had to use our own fuel from the B Coy echelon. S/Sgt Smit arrived with the B Coy echelon during the night. A guide directed them to our position. We refuelled and prepared to depart in haste to Mavinga. Ben and the echelon had to stay behind at Luenge when we continued to the front. They had to wait for the arrival of the 61 Mech echelon to replenish.

On 3 September the situation on the front started flaring up. The SA 8 missile system with 21 Bde shot down a Bosbok which was on a reconnaissance flight. In the period of 4 to 6 September our artillery inflicted heavy

casualties on 47 and 21 Bdes. They came to a halt, presumably awaiting bridge equipment and supplies.



About 10km from Luenge we had to leave Ratel 22B behind. The Tiffies did not have the necessary spares available for the repairs. We had a few options. We could abandon the vehicle for the 61 Mech echelon to recover it during the following day but it was not a good option. I could also have sent it back with my recovery team, which would have left me with no recovery capability. The best solution was to leave the driver and gunner with the Ratel to be recovered the following day by the 61 Mech echelon. I informed WO1 Kemp and we continued the advance at the maximum possible speed.

Dreyer van Niekerk recalls: *“During the advance to Mavinga the hydraulic pipes of 22B ruptured and my gunner and I had to stay behind. The next day RSM Kemp would have recovered us. Unfortunately, the RSM got lost and it seemed that we were forgotten about. I really cannot remember how long we waited, but it was long enough without food and water. We were very glad when*

*the Tiffies arrived and gave us food and water.”*

RSM Kemp decided to follow a different route to the front, thus bypassing 22B altogether. They stayed there for about 2 weeks before recovery.

On 4 and 5 September I had to attend a meeting at 20 Bde HQ. I left Bravo Coy behind under command of Chris Vorster. With a protection element, I departed to link up with a UNITA Officer at a predetermined rendezvous west of Mavinga. Fernando Aral Almeida was my interpreter. It was already dark when we met up with the officer. After a while, it seemed to me that he used the opportunity of a free ride to pay a visit to all his deployments. We drove through a few burnt out positions. Apparently, there had been an airstrike earlier that day. After hours and no sign of the Bde HQ yet, I was getting increasingly agitated and through Fernando confronted the UNITA Officer. Then very shortly afterwards we arrived at Bde HQ.

The conclusion at the session was that there would be three combat groups. Combat Group A would consist of 61 Mech with Cmdt Smit in command, but without Bravo Coy and the ATk Pl. We became the 20 Bde Reserve. Henceforth we would be known as Combat Group C. Cmdt Hartslief, commanding 32 Bn and 101 Bn, would form Combat Group B. Combat Group C would consist of Bravo Coy, the ATk Pl, an 81 mm Mortar fire group and a medical team.

The original decision was to give command of Combat Group C to Cmdt C. P. du Toit. I would then

become his second in command. That was a sound decision from a tactical point of view. He was my senior by far and was combat group course qualified. I was only combat team course qualified. I however disputed this decision very strongly. I explained to Col Ferreira that Bravo Coy and the ATk Pl had been together since their arrival in December 1986 and that we were a closely-knit unit. Cmdt Smit supported my arguments. At the end of the discussion, my possessiveness about Bravo Coy and, I think, Cmdt Smit's persuasiveness, turned the decision in my favour.

I departed as a very happy Major. The newly established brigade reserve, CGp C had to assemble about 25km southeast of Mavinga, where the medical team was awaiting our arrival. As we approached the area, a lone MiG (Russian fighter jet) appeared and bombed the area. A while later more MiG's appeared and brought down an intensive bombardment on the area. This forced CGp C to move into an assembly area more to the southwest of Mavinga.

Dr George Scharf recalls: *"I was part of the surgical team during Ops Modulêr. We were probably the first surgical team ever to deploy ahead of the BAA (Brigade Administrative Area) and axes of advance! One day we performed a tactical retreat. We were just into a temporary laager when a bomb from a lone MiG exploded about 800m west of us. That was when you joined us as rear-guard. You will remember that the doctors broke radio silence by asking where one another were. The one guy said: "We are about 800m directly east of where that*

*bomb just exploded.” We immediately buggered off and the MiG’s came to bomb our previous position. We told that doctor off something seriously. He was nearly assaulted when he then naively remarked that “they don’t understand Afrikaans”, and I had to remind him that any German (pilot) would understand ‘800m east’, etc.”*



## **CHAPTER 8**

### **THIS IS WAR**

This chapter describes the two contacts that CGp C had on 13 September 1987. This was our first action as CGp C, the 20 Brigade reserve.

#### **Prelude to 13 September**

On 8 September, we joined up with CGp A about 10km southwest of Mavinga. This was a time for much needed vehicle maintenance and rest. On the front the FAPLA 21 Bde started to cross the Lomba River about 12km east of its confluence with the Cunzumbia. CGp B reacted with a motorized infantry company and an ATk group equipped with 90mm Ratels. Supported by Quebec battery, CGp B was able to delay the crossing and only one enemy company got across.

It was clear that 21 Bde was planning to cross the river with its tanks. Cmdt Hartslief ordered Hannes Northmann, with the remaining elements of the ATk squadron, to deploy to the area of the intended crossing. Hannes arrived on the scene on the morning of 10 September. We as CGp C moved closer to the area to act as reserve and to strengthen CGp B, should it be necessary.

Meanwhile 21 Bde had established a bridgehead of battalion strength during the night, and the FAPLA tanks started to cross the river. They had to cross the mobile bridge in close formation. This exposed them to the



concentrated fire of 20 Artillery Regiment. Hannes engaged the individual vehicles crossing and 21 Bde lost its momentum. The southern bridgehead was successfully attacked by the infantry element of CGp B. 21 Bde was forced to abandon its efforts to cross the Lomba River and withdrew to the northern side of the river. During this contact Hannes destroyed two T55's (Soviet battle tanks) with his new ZU ATk missiles.

The waiting in anticipation was finally over. CGp C had to assist CGp B. We had to relieve Hannes on this crossing to allow Cmdt Hartslief to consolidate his forces. Cmdt Hartslief guided us in to the impact point. What a scene. It was like a battle movie on the Somme. There were shallow trenches everywhere, encircled by barbed wire. There was no uncertainty that this was the real thing. This was the front. We did not experience any contact and simply occupied the south bank.



East of this position, 47 Bde was already south of the Lomba. They had reached the confluence with the Cuzizi

River where they started to prepare their positions. The Bde deployed its tactical group from its main position to about 4km to its east. That was an old UNITA logistical base. CGp B was instructed to attack this deployment on 12 September, to prevent 47 and 59 Bde's from linking up.

CGp C had to detach one of the ATk groups to CGp B for the attack. Logistical problems however prevented the intended CGp B attack on 12 September. The attack was postponed to 13 September. The detached ATk group from CGp C (72 – 2Lt Kooij) joined up with CGp B late in the afternoon of 12 September. CGp B moved out at about 07:00 on 13 September.

There was some disagreement between Hartsliet and UNITA about the correct position of the enemy. By clarifying this issue, Hartsliet realized that FAPLA was indeed in the old UNITA logistical base. This was not an ideal situation and the prospects did not appeal to Hartsliet. He described the attack to me about a month afterwards, whilst deployed on the Mianei front.

### **Day Attack 13 September**

The first phase of the attack was against entrenched FAPLA infantry. The FAPLA deployment forced Hartsliet to enter into a target area that favoured them more than his own force. FAPLA knew the terrain well, but to him it was unknown territory. The base stretched out for at least 2km in the bush line from east to west. He was forced to use the only access road, obviously under observation

from FAPLA. There were very deep camouflaged bunkers, some with overhead cover constructed from tree logs. It would not take the weight of a vehicle passing over it. The danger was that the vehicle might disappear into the bunker, and then have to be recovered under enemy fire. The base was crisscrossed with trenches in all directions. There were many places for RPG attacks.

Hartslief decided to enter the base under support fire from the 120mm mortars and to deploy on the inside. He deployed one infantry company on the command axis, which was the east-west road through the base. One ATk Gp was deployed to their left and one to their right. Hannes commanded the recovery vehicles and one infantry company deployed in depth.

They started the advance with support fire from the G5's and the 120mm mortars. About 500m into the target, they observed FAPLA infantry withdrawing to the north. He redeployed his depth element to face north to the bush line, on the edge of the Lomba floodplain. Then they engaged all movement in the direction of the Lomba. With this deployment the FAPLA infantry retreat across the river became suicidal. They tried to escape westwards in the bush line. The leading 32 Bn infantry company turned their front to the north. By doing this, FAPLA was trapped in the bush line. More than 200 FAPLA soldiers were killed while, at that stage, Hartslief had not encountered any losses to his own force.

Johan Kooij recalls: *“We left CGp C and joined up with CGp B. It felt strange to link up with another combat*

*group. We were used to our own integrated formations that we rehearsed with Bravo Coy at Omuthiya. For us it was a drill. With CGp B having Ratel 90's, Casspirs (armoured personnel carriers) and Buffels (another type of armoured personnel carrier), it was not so easy to understand exactly what was expected of us. We also experienced sporadic loss of communications with Cmdt Hartslief."*

Rudi Nuyts recalls: *"The 13th Sept was the first time we were involved in a real contact situation. I remember the intense anxiety and fear that I felt. As a driver (and maybe it applied to all of us) you only knew what was necessary for you to know. I never actually knew the 'bigger picture' or details of what was happening on the ground. Driving the Ratel was a full time job in itself. It was not easy to navigate my Ratel across the trenches. On the morning of 13 September we (ATk Gp 72) were attached to 32 Bn, which consisted of Ratel 90's, Casspirs and Buffels. It was also our first encounter with enemy in trenches on that day. We were a superior force and the enemy suffered many casualties. Initially we encountered only infantry. I remember a FAPLA soldier sitting in a foxhole right in front of me. My gunner was shooting at him with his turret machine gun. At a stage our Ratel was too close for the machine gun to dip any further, so I just drove over him."*

*"I observed how one of the 32 Bn gunners ripped an enemy soldier to pieces with his Casspir's mounted machine gun. I saw when the soldier stood up in his foxhole. His one hand was only hanging on a few sinews,*

*while with each heartbeat the blood was spurting. A stream of bullets from the Casspir then ripped him to pieces. The FAPLA soldiers eventually tried to flee en masse. There were literally hundreds of them. They chose a very bad place to dig their trenches. It was in a semi-circled area, and they were with their backs to an open sjona (open, typically treeless, grassland). They tried to cross the sjona when they realized that they had no chance against us. They could only make very slow progress through the water and mud. As a result we had quite an open target. I saw literally hundreds of them die that day.”*

Dawid Momberg recalls: *“I remember we were integrated with 32 Bn Casspirs. Suddenly FAPLA infantry jumped up from their foxholes and trenches and shot at us with heat strim grenades from their AK47’s. Medic Doubell, with us in the Ratel, shot at them through the rear rifle port. I think it was both the first and last time that Cpl van Vuuren had the opportunity to throw hand grenades from the turret.”*

Up to that moment they encountered only infantry, exposed to their vastly superior firepower. CGp B seemed to be the victors. However, things started to change rapidly. As they progressed further west into the objective, they encountered more aggressive infantry. These started to fight back. During this fight, two Ratel 90’s got stuck in deep trenches. A third Ratel 90 tried to pull them out, when Tanks approached. The third Ratel disengaged and was stuck in the mire of the sjona. All three the Ratels were now immobilized and very much at the mercy of the

approaching tanks.

Hannes brought the recovery vehicles in, but he could not see the immobilized Ratels. At that stage, a tank with its turret facing backward was chasing a Casspir, trying to ram it. This tank appeared through the thick bush about 100m from where Hannes was trying to find the immobilized Ratels. The T55 managed to get its canon to face the front and started firing. Own forces then engaged. They hit the tank, but it kept on moving. It took six more hits before its crew abandoned it.

Hannes was still unable to find the stuck Ratels. He did find the Buffel of Franken and recovered it. He then found the Ratel that was stuck in the mire in the sjona. It was burning fiercely. The blast of the exploding ammo inside the Ratel nearly hit Hannes. At last the stationary Ratels were also found. Their crews abandoned the Ratels, which explained why they did not throw smoke as Hannes instructed them earlier. Some FAPLA infantrymen were scavenging inside the Ratels for ration packs. Hannes engaged and killed them. He then recovered the Ratels with approaching tanks in very close proximity.

Hartsliel learned that at least another six T55's were on their way (47 Bde Tactical Group). He withdrew his force from the objective - his CGp being subjected to far superior enemy firepower. His losses were one Ratel 90 and two Casspirs destroyed.

Rudi Nuyts recalls: *"A T55 appeared through the thick bush to our left, without warning. Initially we (72*

*ATk Group with 4 Ratel 90's) were on our own, but we were soon joined by 32 Bn Ratel 90's. My gunner fired on the tank and it came to a halt about 100m in front of us. I believe that they were surprised and did not know where the fire was coming from, because they then fired a shot in a very wrong direction. What greatly terrified me was the long flame that came out of that barrel. My gunner as well as a 32 Bn Ratel engaged the tank. We fired many rounds. Initially the rounds did not seem to do much damage but at last the T55 crew started to abandon the tank. Between the two Ratel 90's we fired at least 30 rounds. If I remember correctly three or four more tanks were destroyed between 72 and 32Bn."*

Dawid Momberg recalls: *"Donavan Engelbrecht was in my Ratel as loading assistant. He was extremely efficient handing over the rounds from the bomb racks at the back of the turret."*

Jaco Swanevelder recalls: *"I strongly believe that the presence of ATk Gp 72 that morning made a significant difference to the outcome of the morning's battle. I am convinced that we prevented bigger losses. Later in Modulêr, Hannes Northmann presented each ATk leader with a set of 32 Bn camo's and declared that we were honorary members of 32 Bn."*

### **Night attack 13 September**

At about 16:00, CGp C received orders from Bde HQ to advance to the target, which was evacuated by CGp B. My instructions were to recover the own forces' abandoned

vehicles and to destroy those which could not be recovered. Bde HQ gave me the assurance that the enemy vacated the target. Some UNITA officers were of the same opinion.

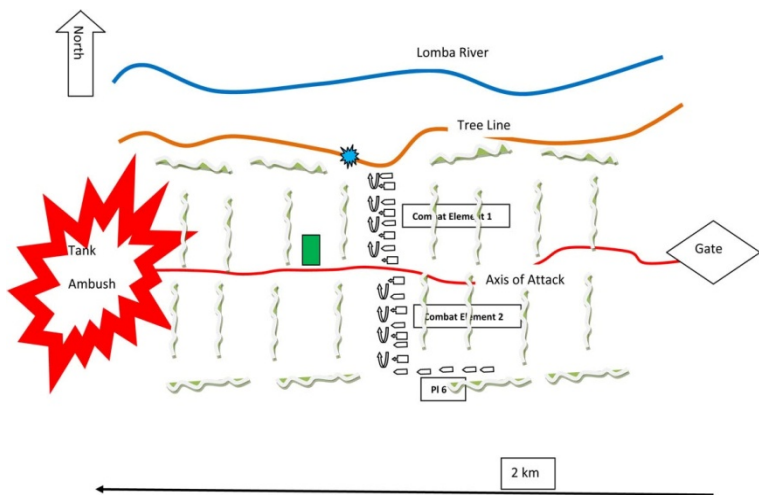
I did find it strange that FAPLA withdrew from the target area. Only an hour prior, CGp B withdrew due to confirmed information of the approach of at least six tanks, part of the 47 Bde Tactical Group. In addition, with a tactical group there must have been some other heavy elements as well. And then, a few hours afterwards, with darkness approaching, the enemy had allegedly vacated the area? Highly questionable!

ATk Gp 72, who participated in the morning attack, returned to my command for this venture. This created a challenge, because 72 were in critical need of fuel and ammunition and the echelon was at least 45 minutes behind. Ben Smit responded immediately. It was already past 17:00 when the replenishment was completed. I could not form a clear picture of what to expect in the target area. Johan Kooij could only recall a very basic picture of the first km or so into the target, as he observed it that morning. Then the T55's entered the scene. With such a threat one fights for survival, there was no time for sightseeing. From then on he concentrated on the enemy, not on terrain.

Hannes, in his effort to locate the stuck 32 Bn Ratels during the morning attack, was the best informed about the approximate location of the vehicles that we were supposed to either recover or destroy (2 Casspirs to



recover and another two to destroy). He was to become our guide. By this time there was no doubt that we were facing a very fragile night operation. I became very concerned about the lack of illumination bombs for my 60mm conventional mortars, carried by Pl 6. It was clear that I could not rely on any artillery support. Due to the morning's fighting, 20 Bde's indirect fire support capability was either busy redeploying or busy replenishing. Should they even have been in a position to render support, they would not have been able to do so. There was no forward observer allocated to CGp C. I expressed my concerns to 20 Bde HQ, but bad interference on the radio made it impossible to communicate clearly. I had to move!



We moved out to the target and reached the entrance to the Log Base about 19:00. As I was deploying my forces inside of the gate in combat element formation, a UNITA soldier approached the UNITA Liaison officer on

my vehicle. They both wanted to know how I intend to deal with the tank ambush. This did not come as a shock to me, since we all knew or should have known that CGp B withdrew under exactly that threat during the day fight. It was an unpleasant confirmation of known facts. A night fight now finally became inevitable.

I had little choice on my command axis. It had to be the east-west road through the base. It was the only option. Combat Element 2 (72 and 22), were to deploy integrated on the left i.e. south of the command axis while Combat Element 1 (71 and 21) were to deploy integrated on the right of the axis i.e. north of the axis with their right boundary the tree line of the Lomba floodplain. This gave me a very broad front of 16 Ratels. I deployed Pl 6, with the conventional base plate 60mm mortars, to the south. Their task was to act as my flank force, preventing FAPLA from enveloping my southern flank. They were also my main source of illumination.

With the T55 threat and rapidly increasing darkness, I instructed the infantry to debus and walk between the Ratels. This was the right thing to do considering the dense terrain, the darkness, the trenches, and the pending tank ambush. My own lessons learnt during Ops Askari proved that infantry is less vulnerable on the ground than in the Ratel. One well aimed T55 round can wipe out a section in a Ratel in seconds. Furthermore, it is the classic role of infantry to protect the armour – in this case all the Ratels, and especially the Ratel 90's.

We started a slow but cautious advance. Later

reconstruction of the night combat proved that we only moved 1800m over the next three hours. That was about 10 meters per minute. I instructed the 60mm mortars to be very stingy in the use of their illumination rounds. It was very dark, and it was a reasonable pace for infantry on foot given the circumstances.

About halfway through the target, I could clearly see the glow of the unfortunate Ratel from the attack that morning. I made that observation near a kind of parade ground with a bush pavilion on my command axis. Bde HQ increasingly became a nuisance - being constantly on the radio and chasing me up. At a certain stage I just confirmed reception, but I was going to do it my way, and in the most effective manner that the given circumstances allowed me to do. After all, they ordered this potentially suicidal mission, not me.

My command Ratel was not equipped with radio installations to facilitate my new role as a combat group commander. I had to use man pack radios for my rear link. I had to set priorities for the communications and obviously it was to fight the battle, not to give a running commentary to 20 Bde HQ.

At that stage some of my elements were experiencing seriously increasing difficulty with visibility. Losing command cohesion became a real possibility. My ability to try to construct a visual image in my head on the specific position of my 16 Ratels on a broad front became overstretched. I only knew that some Ratels were stuck and that their reference on their position relative to the

command axis became ambiguous.

I had to restore their orientation, or lose command and control. I instructed the torching of the huts and structures next to the command axis. The risk was that the fire would silhouette us. This to me was a small price to pay for regaining command and control. It was not the best thing to do; it was the only thing to do. If CGp B got totally disorientated during the morning attack, in broad daylight, even more so the potential for chaos that night. Only two Casspirs were recovered at that stage. It was about 23:00.



Jaco Swanevelder recalls: *“Our slow pace was due to the lack of illumination rounds, the dense bush and the many huts and trenches that had to be checked as we advanced. By 22:00, out of exasperation, Lotter ordered that the huts along his command axis be torched to establish a reference point for his elements on the front. At that stage only two of the missing Casspirs had been recovered, while two were still somewhere out there in the darkness.*

*Then FAPLA opened fire on Combat Element 1, with eight tanks engaging. This resulted in chaos. The situation deteriorated when the commander of Combat Element 1 lost all forms of communication. All the vehicles in this column turned their radios back to Lotter's command radio, jamming up an already over-stretched system.*

*Lotter then ordered Lt Kooij, commanding the left hand column, to move up and take control, while he struggled to bring order out of the overall chaos. Kooij engaged the T55's. These actions restored order and allowed Lotter to gain control. FAPLA engaged with BM 21 rockets, being fired from across the river. Lotter gained approval to withdraw. A number of tanks started manoeuvring around his southern flank.*



*With the six remaining, active Ratel 90's, Kooij effectively covered the CGp C attempt to retreat. Lotter started pulling his force back in 100 meter bounds. At the end of each bound, control points were established to account for all. It was however impossible to make a clean break away. As his force retreated, FAPLA followed in*

*pursuit. That meant that Kooij had to re-engage. FAPLA ceased pursuing the disengaging force at 02:00, for unknown reasons. A clean breakaway could at last be achieved."*

I was so thankful that night. No fatalities! Without any doubt, this display of dedication on that uncertain night was the first chapter on the ultimate destruction of 47 Bde.



Wayne Bruwer recalls: *"On the evening of 13 September 1987, we were trying to avoid driving into trenches or ditches. Light was very poor. Andrew Doubell (71 medic) and I (72 signaller) left our respective vehicles and were guiding our vehicles backwards. I remember hearing a very loud whooshing sound over my head, followed by automatic gunfire. Someone, presumably 2Lt Anton Pretorius, was shouting at us to get inside. There was no time to think or be afraid; the goal was simply to get inside the Ratel."*

*I believe that the "whoosh" sound was from a Soviet*

*multiple rocket launcher (Stalin Organ). Maybe it sounds dramatic, but for many years after that day, I perceive 13/09/1987 as my new birthday. As we got inside the Ratel events developed rapidly. We experienced continuous stoppages on both our turret machine gun and the 90mm canon. Willemse (72 gunner) was not a happy man. Then Cornie got injured and we transferred him to our vehicle.”*

Dawid Momberg recalls: *“We (72) were detached to 32 Bn for the attack that morning but went back to join up with CGp C for the recovery exercise. I will never forget how fed up we were after the morning's battle alongside 32Bn - and then had to go back with CGp C that same night! We survived, but it was far better to fight that morning, in daylight, than in the dark later that night.”*

Cornie Botes recalls: *“The mortars could not provide enough illumination. We met an obstacle in the form of a trench and 71 had to breach it. I crossed first, followed by Jaco Swanevelder. In the process, we had to turn our Ratels around and cross the trench in reverse. We were waiting for Theuns and Anton to come into place, when the flair went up. Then all hell broke loose. A bullet hit me in the forehead through my headset. It was just blood all over my face. The blood clogged the radio mouthpiece. Herkie and Smittie did not have an intercom facility and we had to shout at each other.”*

Theuns Cloete recalls: *“We went in to clear up around 17:30. The further we went in the more dead bodies and stuff we see, with the smell of hair and flesh burning. UNITA said that there was an ambush with 8*

*tanks and lots of infantry. Around 22:00 we drew lots of fire. They were shooting at us with tanks and missiles (Stalin Organ elevated to ground level). We returned fire but ran out of illumination mortars and could not see well anymore. We drew a lot of fire and the infantry started withdrawing, while we remained behind. When they had completely withdrawn we also left. We drove back a bit and waited for the recovery to lift two Casspirs. We drove further afterwards and went to sleep approximately 20km from there.”*

Barry Snyman recalls: *“We accompanied Bravo Coy to go and recover 101Bn Casspirs, trapped in bomb craters. It was totally ‘crazy’ and unrealistic. We were crawling along when all hell broke loose. We were directly behind 20. We were all sitting on top of 28 and I must admit I was not even a little afraid at that moment. That was all to change soon enough. Everything looked like a movie show. It did not seem real. There was tracer fire going in all directions. The 81mm mortars were lighting up the sky, making it look like daylight.*

*Somewhere some maniac from 32Bn or 101Bn went on a recce amongst the enemy and came back to report positions of enemy equipment. Then the Ratel 20mm tracers hit the tanks and shot straight up. The Ratel 90's then moved in and did their thing. It was only when a BM 21 got hit, and the rockets started going off, that we seemed to grasp reality. A rocket passed somewhere overhead and it felt very, very close. We all dived inside the hatches. I remember feeling as sick as a dog when we finally returned sometime later. My nerves were*



*shattered.”*

At last, I could disengage from the fight. We drove back eastwards on a track that, from time to time, was clearly visible from the Lomba north bank. We travelled about 4km on this track before we turned due south. We had to continue for a few kilometres. We drove until we found some area with relatively adequate vegetation to conceal us from the air. Only then did I have the time to construct a clear picture of the situation. No fatalities and everyone accounted for! This was a great relief. During the day of 14 September, we were forced to hide in very unfavourable terrain. The Angolan air force was very active. Most vegetation was just ashes. Therefore, the open laager was spread over a large area. During that night, we moved to a more suitable spot, but our tracks were obviously picked up from the air. The next morning as I approached the Ratel of Johan Kooij to congratulate him on his 20th birthday, we received a farewell gift from FAPLA. Some MiGs carried out an airstrike on an area less than 1km away.

The same afternoon I attended an order group with Cmdt Smit, to plan the attack on 47 Bde scheduled for 16 September. This attack was to be from west to east.

### **Debrief**

During my first conventional exposure in Ops Askari 1983/84 my company (A) was detached to form part of Combat Group Delta. There I was subjected to ill-considered instructions. I saw myself as very privileged to

participate in Ops Modulêr as combat team/group commander.

This exposure during Modulêr resulted in me subjecting all instructions to a logical examination in my mind. (Except for the occasions where I went into battle with Cmdt Smit!) I did not expect Bde HQ to be perfect. They just had to understand the war. What would have happened that night if I just stormed in like they required? CGp B already received a hiding the same morning. They would not have been able to react. CGP A was too far away to provide us with support. In my opinion, if we were pinned that night, the history of the war would have read differently today.

It was expected of me to recover a couple of burnt out, stranded vehicles from the goal - without indirect fire support and without sufficient illumination. This was due to a senseless policy from the hierarchy that no RSA equipment could end up in the hands of the enemy. They were willing to risk more lives regardless of the losses of that morning's attack. We moved in close to dusk and deployed inside the Log base, to search for what, in the dark? Bde HQ expected me to storm in. I did not. It took nearly four hours to move less than 2km in the dark of night. I was busy just about an hour when Bde HQ started bothering me about speed. They could not guarantee me any support, just orders to rush! Bde HQ made the rules. At dusk, when I wanted answers about support, all of a sudden the radio communications were very unclear. However, when they wanted to force down the impossible on you, the communications were excellent. So, the rule

was – you listened to the radio when it suited you. I also applied that rule - I heard nothing if I did not want to hear it.

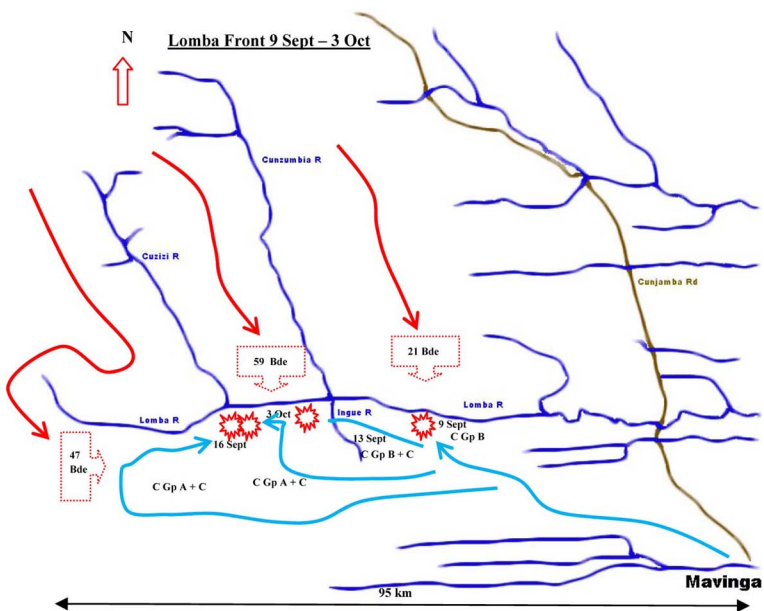
It was also the first time that we applied the “backside-forward” drill, as described in CHAPTER 5.

Jaco Swanevelder recalls: *“That night we applied the ‘backside first’ trench crossing. The main problem was that there were still one or two 90’s with their rear ends pointing towards the enemy, when they started shooting at us. That, and struggling with communications, made our lives fairly difficult. My Ratel also got semi-stuck in a bunker after they started shooting at us. Piet Pieterse, my gunner, jumper out under a hail of bullets to get 71C to come and give us a little nudge. After the first fright and the chaos, with Anton’s arm caught by the recoil and Botes who was shot in the head, I was quite surprised at how calm the crews of the six resisting 90’s were.”*

Warren Sheridan recalls: *“I was running in front of the vehicle so we could get back to the boys fast when that f\_cking Stalin Organ went off. During training I hit the ground with speed, but nothing in comparison to that night.”*

Two things saved us that night. FAPLA did not think we would be able to cross those last deep trenches. It was probably their plan to push us up against the trenches by means of the tank flanking movement from the south. However, when we started crossing the trenches they had to activate the ambush. They also did not expect such a

wide front (16 Ratels: 8 x 90's and 8 x 20's).



## **CHAPTER 9**

### **FIRST CONTACTS AGAINST 47 BDE**

On 16 September 61 Mech Bn Gp attacked 47 Bde for the first time. This attack was from the west. We as CGp C deployed south of the command axis. The attack was inconclusive due to very dense terrain.

#### **Battle on 16 September**

We were still recovering from the night attack on 13 September when I learned about the intended attack on 47 Bde scheduled for 16 September.

CGp A and CGp C were to advance on a broad front from the west. About midday on 15 September we (CGp C) moved back to CGp A to plan for the attack. By then our knowledge about the FAPLA Bde movements was more accurate than during the 13 September attacks.

Cmdt Smit detailed his plan and we plot the plan on our maps accordingly. His plan stipulated a broad front attack with CGp A to the north and CGp C to the south. The concept was that CGp A would first make contact on the left flank. Pending the accuracy of this, CGp C would then serve as the southern flank. Another option would have been for CGp C to swing north to execute a flank attack, or to act as a direct fire support base.

CGp C was in the lead. We started at 05:00 on 16 September, from an assembly area about 9km south of the Lomba, advancing in a westerly direction. After about

15km we turned north and then east again in line with the source of the Lomba. This last leg was also to be our axis of attack. Our air force started bombing 47 Bde early that morning.

Just as we started the eastern advance we were rocketed by our own air force. They suddenly approached from the east, without any warning. Due to the sharp sunlight in our eyes we could only detect them at the last moment. They dived and attacked us with rockets. We did not anticipate an air attack from the enemy with so many of our own planes in the air. My gunner, Karel Koen saw them first and shouted “MiGs”. Then I saw them diving. Luckily, they were off target and the salvo exploded about 100m parallel to our north. They must have realized their mistake, because they disappeared without any further rocketing. We were unharmed, but the incident was unnerving and had the smell of a bad omen.

Martin Bremer (C Sqn) recalls: *“Our artillery already started bombing the area long before the time. We moved across one of these “cleaned-up” areas when we received the command to fish-bone and wait for an incoming bombardment. We found a space underneath a leafless tree and the next moment it was booming all around us. We only realized later on that it was our own Buccaneers that revved us.”*

We crossed the starting line at about 08:30. Our battlefield surveillance was not good. We did not know exactly where the FAPLA first deployments were. Due to the dense vegetation and the confirmed proximity of

T55's, we were forced to let the infantry debus prematurely. I think it was about 4km west of the confirmed FAPLA deployments. Our progress was extremely slow because the Ratels had to adjust their speed to that of the debussed infantry.

The movement on foot demanded a great deal of endurance from the infantry. Initially they did mutual movement, but as we progressed and fatigue set in, they just moved between the Ratels. It took about five hours to complete the distance of 4km. Due to the wide front of our deployment of more than 20 Ratels, control became problematic. At one point, CGp A would move into the fire arches of CGp C and vice versa.

Martin Bremer (C Sqn) recalls: *"The infantry climbed out when we saw the first signs of the enemy, but it was actually just recently evacuated trenches. 47 Bde saw us coming, or surely felt the assault of the G5's - and simply got up and moved eastwards for a kilometre or three."*



We came under indirect fire at about 11:30. As we

progressed the intensity of mortar fire on us increased. FAPLA observers obviously did not have clear observation on us, because a lot of the mortar fire exploded behind the front line, and made things difficult for the HQ element. This indicated that we had to adjust our advance more to the northeast. Our own 120mm mortars started engaging targets in the 47 Bde position.

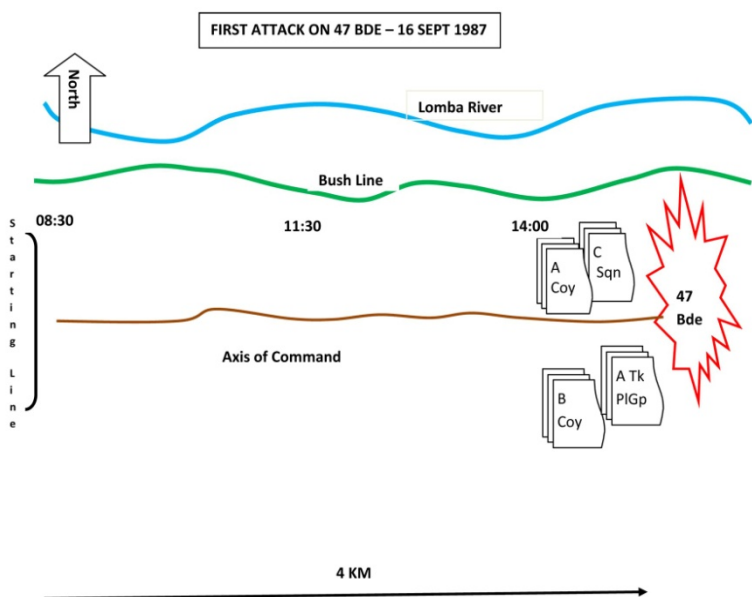
The same limitations hindering FAPLA were equally limiting to our own observers. CGp A on the left flank made first contact with FAPLA in trenches north of the command axis. They also received most of the FAPLA indirect fire. It was easier for FAPLA to drop mortars just on the bush line, which they knew we would use for navigation. We started drawing direct fire at about 14:00 when the left flank started engaging heavy infantry and T55's.

On the right flank, CGp C made contact. Suddenly we were among trenches and the enemy. Due to our rigid formation linked to CGp A, I could not manoeuvre my force. The situation became very dangerous. However, the potentially volatile situation on the left flank shortened my dilemma. Cmdt Smit gave the command to pull back. CGp C had to hold the front a little bit longer to allow CGp A to disengage. They fell back and consolidated about 2km to the west. We pulled back in combat formation from firm base to firm base to ensure that FAPLA did not put up a chase. I was instructed to mark the route for a second attack, probably that same night.





Our retreat was covered by white phosphorus 120mm mortar fire. After a brief period of intense unease about the night attack, Cmdt Smit convinced Bde HQ that it was not a good idea. We were supposed to attack again the following morning. However, that attack was cancelled.



Theuns Cloete recalls: “*The afternoon around 16:00,*

*after a lot of searching for the enemy, we made contact. At that time we were already among the enemy lines and they started shooting at us from all sides. We pulled back because the terrain was too dense and we were not exactly sure where the enemy was.”*

### **Interlude - 17 September to 3 October**

By 18 September CGp C had moved to a position closer to CGp B, to be able to support them on short notice. Our artillery dominated the fighting during the ensuing days.

The intended deployments of the FAPLA Bde's were uncertain and necessitated a constant state of alertness. On 20 September a number of air force strikes went in on 47 Bde. By 21 September 47 Bde was isolated and desperately running short of supplies. 47 Bde tried until 26 September to establish a crossing on the Lomba. They had the TMM bridge for the task, but could only get it in place once they managed to establish a tree stump road across the floodplain.

(TMM Bridge: Vehicle launched mechanical bridge).

This needed to be established on both the northern and southern banks of the Lomba - a combined distance of about 1.4km. By 28 September, their efforts were unsuccessful. They were ordered to move eastwards with all possible speed. On 2 October, advance elements of 47 Bde reached a point opposite the confluence of the Cuzizi with the Lomba. They were now in less favourable terrain than on 16 September. For us, this made a second attack on 47 Bde practicable. The attack was planned to take

place on 5 October, but due to the position of 47 Bde on 2 October, it was decided to attack on 3 October.

### **Debrief**

On 30 September, it was clear that the FAPLA advance had been stopped. However, their capability to renew their initial objective – the occupation of Mavinga – was not broken. Our tactical objective – stop FAPLA, had been achieved. The strategic and political aims were not. Should we have left Angola at that critical stage, there was no way that UNITA could have coped. The operation had to continue.



## **CHAPTER 10**

### **DEFEATING 47 BDE**

After the unsuccessful attack on 47 Bde on 16 September, we planned for a second attack from the east. Finally, on 2 October 47 Bde moved into a favourable position for us to attack on 3 October.

#### **Reconnaissance for the Attack on 3 October**

Cmdt Smit anticipated that our next attack on 47 Bde would be from the east, along the south bank of the Lomba. In preparation for this, the leader groups of CGp A and CGp C reconnoitred the possible advance axes on 28 September.

We started at the old UNITA log base. We drove in and switched off the vehicles. Everybody walked around in the base freely. My people wandered too far away from the vehicles to my liking. Contrary to Cmdt Smit's instruction, I ordered my driver to start up the vehicle and to drive closer to where my people were. The other groups were widely dispersed in the trenches.

My sixth sense warned me that we were heading for some trouble. As I reached my group the first mortars from the north bank of the Lomba exploded very close to my vehicle. I picked my people up and took them out of the target area. The other groups, especially A Coy, were not so lucky and had to run far to get to their vehicles. About 15 minutes later the MiGs bombed the area. I was not very popular with the others. They claimed it was

prematurely starting my vehicle that brought the mortars and MiG's in.

Duncan B Taylor (C Sqn) recalls: *"We walked around the area with little concern about who was watching us, until the bombs started falling. We crawled through the trenches for ages and eventually I came to a dead end. There I found a senior officer. He was not from C Sqn. We finally came to a decision and made a mad dash for the Ratels, which were all under cover beneath the trees further back."*

Len Robberts (C Sqn) recalls: *"On 28 September we (0B, 20, 72, 30, 13 and 13C) performed a recce of the UNITA log base. There was a shot-out T54 tank near the edge of the sjona. We went to the tank and I took a group photo of the guys on the tank. It was just after a photo of me on the tank was taken that all hell broke loose around us. The enemy across the sjona must have seen us and started shelling us. The mortars fell all around us and it resulted in a process of running, diving into the ground, WHAMMMM...WHAMMMM, as the mortars exploded, getting up, running, diving into the ground..."*

We did not continue our reconnaissance that day. We went back a day or two later to the west of the UNITA log base to determine possible killing areas, should 47 Bde continued to advance east. We identified two ideal places. When CGp A returned, the leader group of CGp C stayed behind for a quick barbeque. That was risky. 47 Bde could not have been more than 5km away so I posted a sentry out. At one stage, my instinct warned me that it was time

to go. We departed the spot with the smell of barbeque in the air. We hoped that FAPLA could also smell it.



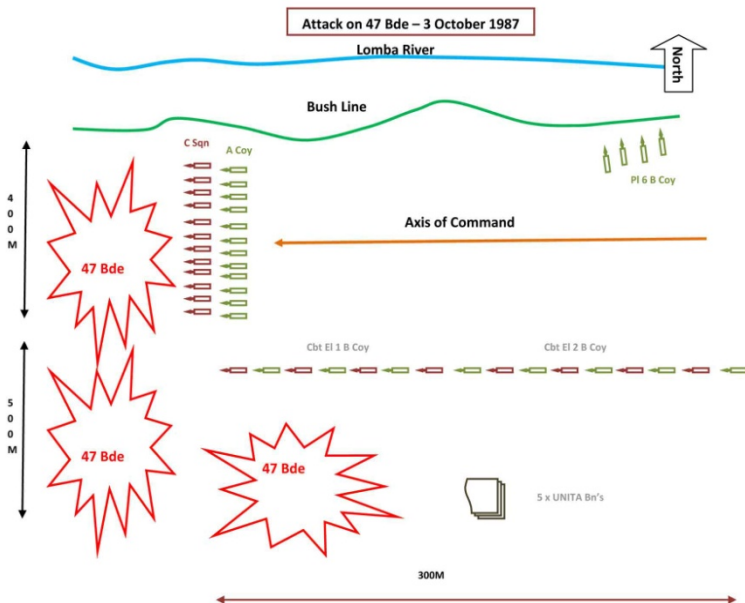
### **The Attack on 3 October**

It was clear by now that it was the intention of 47 Bde to cross the Lomba to the north. The prevention of this plan became our priority.

The battle concept was that we would attack on an east to west axis, as our previous reconnaissance already confirmed. The attack would take place with a wide front. CGp A would do the frontal assault with C Sqn and A Coy. CGp C would form the flank guard to the south, to prevent a FAPLA flank attack. The 60mm converted Pl 6 from B Coy would deploy on the Lomba, preventing an attack from the north. Five UNITA Battalions would attack the FAPLA deployments south of this box formation formed by 61 Mech.

During the day of 2 October and right through the night, 47 Bde attempted to cross over the TMM bridge to

the north bank. This concentration of vehicles was ideal targets for our artillery. By the morning of 3 October, they gave up all attempts. They started to return to their previously occupied positions on the south bank. The time to attack had come.



On the morning of 3 October, CGp A and CGp C were assembled in the old UNITA log base. We started moving on our east to west axis of advance just after 08:00. A UNITA reconnaissance platoon fanned out to our front. They made contact with FAPLA about 10:30 and broke away to the flanks. We deployed as per plan.

Many FAPLA soldiers just abandoned their equipment and made for the crossing point. The TMM bridge was still blocked, but was rammed open by a tank.

Some vehicles tried to cross, and succeeded. Soon the bridge was blocked again. C Sqn went in for the attack and engaged the deployed T55's. A ferocious fight broke out. About midday, C Sqn started to experience heavy resistance. Cmdt Smit pulled them back and called in the G5's. There were reports of T55's moving on the southern flank. When C Sqn engaged for the second time, one ATk Gp (71) from CGp C accompanied them. ATk Gp was deployed on the southern flank of C Sqn.



At this stage, CGp C came under 23mm and 14.5mm fire from the south. The UNITA Battalions drove FAPLA from their positions. FAPLA now streamed to the Lomba, where Pl 6 had an open arch of fire on the flood plain. C Sqn again experienced a shortage of ammo. They also started experiencing problems with the overburdened 90mm recoil systems. 2Lt Hind was killed when a tank round ricocheted from the ground and penetrated the turret of Ratel 33.

They broke contact and Cmdt Smit brought in a G5 bombardment. Both the ATk groups (71 and 72) took



control of the front. There was still a lot of fight left in FAPLA. We recovered Hind's Ratel and in the process shot out another 2 T55's. They then pulled back and returned to fall under my command again. We advanced while C Sqn and A Coy became the reserve. Johan Kooij engaged a self-propelled anti-aircraft gun, with eight direct hits. It disappeared in the bush. It was later located about 2km from the battlefield where it ran out of fuel.



By then all 47 Bde resistance had crumbled. The action moved to the north again, where A Coy and the still serviceable Ratel 90's from C Sqn created havoc for the FAPLA soldiers crossing the open sjona. Just after 17:00 Cmdt Smit assembled his sub unit commanders at his Ratel and announced that 47 Bde was destroyed. We pulled back to a safe area about 8km southeast of the old UNITA log base. It was the responsibility of other SADF elements and UNITA to mop up the battlefield.

## The Ratel 90's recall:

Theuns Cloete recalls: *"We moved in at 05:00 in the morning. We would have been the flank force, but were pulled in to the far left flank very quickly. We received lots of mortar, artillery as well as direct fire with our contact. We pulled back to be replenished. With our second advance we also recovered a shot-out Ratel."*

Jaco Swanevelder recalls: *"We found 18 tanks on the target with 10 being shot out. Six by C Sqn and four by the ATk Platoon. Eight undamaged tanks went to UNITA. The mileage on most was so low that it was clear that they were driven directly from the ships in Luanda to the front at the Lomba. The ATk Pl also shot out a number of BRDM's and BMP's."*

(BRDM: Lightly armoured Russian combat patrol vehicle)

(BMP: Russian tracked infantry fighting vehicle)

Andre Herselman (C Sqn) recalls: *"It was chaos soon after we shot out the first tank, as we didn't know what was shot out and what not anymore. We didn't want to take chances. One also got away. We went over a bush to get into a new position and there it was, dug in right in front of us. I remember the turret and the barrel that was aimed straight at us. Luckily the crew was sitting on top of the turret. I aimed at the turret, fired, and then we reversed at the speed of light. When we returned to take it on from another position it was gone!"*



Jaco Swanevelder recalls: *“When FAPLA ran across the floodplain, 71 and 72 also participated in the “turkey shoot” from the bush-line. We shot a couple of HE’s (High Explosive shells) in among the fleeing bunch. 71A and 72A were firing from stationary positions on either side of one heck of a big tree, nothing more than 10m apart. Firing, without changing position, nearly cost us dearly when a tank across the river shot the tree between us to smithereens. It was so close that fragments of tree and leaves rained down on us. We withdrew from the target area directly afterwards. I often think about the soldiers that died after the will to fight was strangled out of them...is it fair to shoot an enemy, who left his weapons and ran, in the back?”*

The 60mm mortars recall:

Paul Ronge recalls: *“We shot the crap out of them and thinned them out so much that it looked like playing ten-pin bowling with mortars. The barrels heated up so much that the charges ignited before hitting the firing pin. The bombs then fell just a short distance in front of you –*

*harmless naturally, as it had to fly a distance before it armed. We had to p\_ss on the hot pipes to get them to cool down. FAPLA was very close as we did not need to put on maximum charges. The sand was so soft that you had to dig out the small base plate. It was difficult to centre the spirit levels after firing a couple of rounds. The advantage was that you did not need a spade to dig in the base plate. We just made three troughs with our feet, jumped on it with both feet, and it was ready for action!"*

Willie Uys recalls: "Out Ratel was on the far right next to the sjona. I reported to Cmdt Smit that FAPLA was starting to flee across the sjona - all kinds of armoured vehicles and tanks full of troops, some hanging from the sides due to lack of space. Then, 2 minutes later, they were shelled by the artillery and MRL's (Multiple Rocket Launchers). When the dust settled the vehicles were standing still and no living being was left."

The Ratel 20's on the north flank recall:

Robert Torrani recalls: "The small arms fire was bouncing of our Ratel. As I was looking out from the turret, there was a pearl spotted owl sitting on a branch right next to the Ratel as we passed. It just seemed so surreal - small arms fire, artillery rounds going off - in the middle of a battle this owl was just sitting there. Our orders were to deploy on the bush line to fire on the retreating FAPLA. I had a stoppage on the 20mm, firing HE (high explosive) rounds. A browning link had fallen in the chute. I changed it over to armour piercing for a few rounds from the other chute. Then it also got a link

*caught, so we just used the Browning. My corporal was pulling the trigger of the Browning while I was trying to move the turret on targets and trying to sort them out. We were ordered back when we started taking tank fire from the other side of the sjona."*

John McCrum recalls: *"The infantry debussed from the Ratel. The LMG group and I sat in a little depression on the edge of the sjona and looked out over the fleeing FAPLA troops and vehicles. I remember we tried to get comms with the artillery to bomb them, not realizing we already had observers in the area. It seemed to take ages before the airburst finally arrived. After the air burst there weren't as many troops, and the vehicles had stopped moving, some of them were in flames."*

Willie Uys recalls: *"The enemy bombarded us with artillery between 11:00 and 14:00. After 14:00 they didn't anymore – they probably ran out of ammunition!"*

The Ratel 20's on the south flank recall:

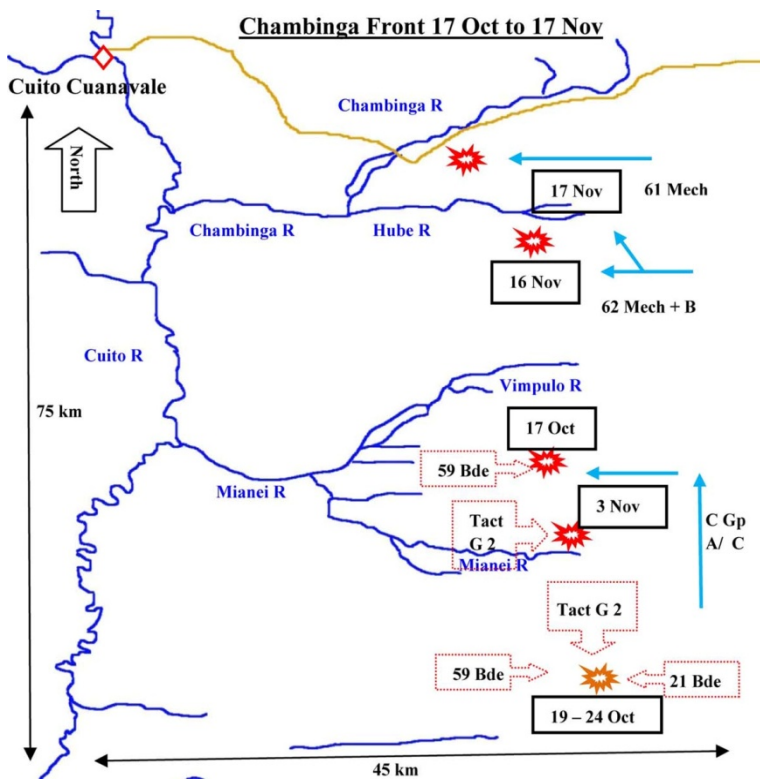
Stelios Moraitis recalls: *"For us it was quite a boring attack. At one stage we were instructed to get down and close the hatches because of mortar and small arms fire. We also received some 23mm fire. It was extremely hot and uncomfortable inside the Ratel. At one stage during the attack, I became aware of someone that had jumped on to the back of my Ratel and was sitting on top of the spare wheel! It was one of those "Operator" people and he politely asked if I minded that he took the liberty of hitching a ride with us. Of course, I agreed, I thought it*

*best to be nice to this chap!"*

Doug Beveridge quoting Igor Zhdarkin: *"At the time of its flight during the crossing of the river Lomba, the 47th brigade lost 18 tanks, 20 armoured troop carriers, 4 D-30 (122mm) guns, 3 BM-21s valley fire, 4 Osa-AK anti-aircraft [mobile] rocket launchers, 2 Osa-AKs transport cars, one P-19 radar station, heavy automobiles, broadcasting stations, mortars, grenade throwers, approximately 200 pieces of small arms, etc., etc."*

### **Debrief**

That day C Sqn was the spearhead. Bravo Coy plus 71 and 72 protected the Southern flank of the attack. At numerous stages this flank experienced serious 23mm and 14.5mm automatic bursts ripping through our formation. My frustration was that I could not break formation and deploy southwards to meet the threat. If I did break formation, I would have left C Sqn vulnerable from the rear. My instinct on turning my flanks to the South was tremendously strong. At one stage one of my Ratel 20's (I think it was Cpl Schutte) was so thickly covered with dust, that I was certain it was hit. I changed over to the platoon frequency – one thing I never did before – because by doing that you might give the Pl Cdr the impression that you want to take over his little piece of responsibility. I was so relieved when Schutte answered – "no hit"!



## **CHAPTER 11**

### **ATTACK ON 59 BDE 17 OCTOBER**

This chapter is about the aftermath of 3 October. The FAPLA forces started retreating towards the Chaminga high grounds. They were however forced to redeploy elements southwards to hunt for the G5's. During this period, we were issued with gas masks in anticipation of the possible use of chemical weapons against us. We clashed with 59th Bde near the source of the Mianei River on 17 October 1987. Although we had to retreat due to terrain, it also forced 59 Bde to retreat north. That brought our artillery within reach of Cuito Cuanavale and the airfield.

### **The FAPLA Retreat**

When FAPLA started retreating after 3 October, it would have been ideal for us to follow up in pursuit. We could however not make use of this opportunity.

We had too little forces available and our supply lines were overstretched. We had no choice but to allow FAPLA to escape. They started to move back to the area at the source of the Cunzumbia and the Chaminga high ground. CGp A and CGp C moved to an area near the source of the Ingwe River. CGp C was warned to be on standby to assist 32 Bn, should the need arise. Our artillery and air force kept the retreating Bdes under pressure.

A new directive was issued. The second phase of the



operation would be to destroy FAPLA forces east of the Quito River by 15 December. However, 4 SAI Bn would only be available by 20 October. The possibility that FAPLA might use chemical weapons was considered a real threat. On 8 Oct CGp C was absorbed into CGp A. In theory, this meant that CGp C ceased to exist. This was theory because we were still used independently from 61 Mech.

### **Gas Masks**

On 7 October, gas masks were issued and training on their use took place. Since the beginning of the operation we were aware that FAPLA might have the capability to use chemical weapons against us. Some UNITA reports indicated that gas was indeed used against them.



Stelios Moraitis recalls: *“I did the full drill only once. I was sitting in my foxhole with my facemask on and covered with my bivvy. The MiG’s came to bomb again. I tried to report on the radio and realised no one would understand what I was saying, so I took it off! It was*

*unbearably hot in the foxhole too. I think after that first time, we all decided to take our chances, seeing those guys could never bomb us accurately anyway..."*

John McCrum recalls: *"I remember doing the gas mask in the foxhole drill, covered with poncho in 30 plus degrees. Bloody hot and uncomfortable."*

### **Reconnaissance on 59 Bde**

On 15 October, Danie Laas took the leader group on reconnaissance to the source of the Mianei River. We only used two vehicles. His Ratel, which was without a canon, and a Buffel. We came across the old tracks from 47 Bde, but we detected no recent activity. It was late afternoon when we departed back to our assembly area.



What we did not know was that we were under observation from FAPLA reconnaissance teams. 59 Bde was redeploying to the north of the Mianei and they nearly encircled us. We drew some very light small arms fire, but we thought it was UNITA stray bullets. When we reached the assembly area, we learned about the redeployment of

59 Bde. We reconstructed the events and realised our narrow escape – maybe 5 minutes before they would have captured us.



This was confirmed the next morning when the fresh tracks were found.

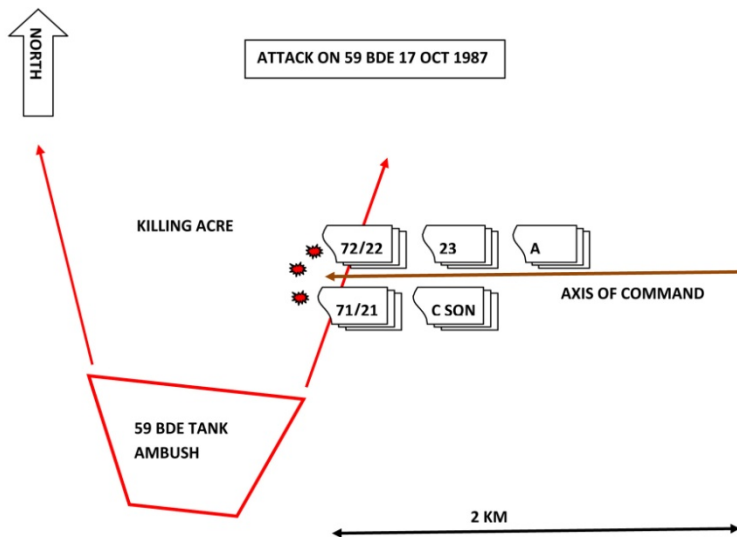
### **The Attack on 59 Bde - 17 Oct**

On 16 October, Cmdt Smit received orders to attack 59 Bde. The attack was to take place on 17 October.

We moved north under cover of darkness to the source of the Mianei River. We reached the forward assembly area about 03:00. As we advanced further north, we found the fresh tracks of 59 Bde leading to the west. It was clear that FAPLA entered the gap between the Vimpulo and Mianei Rivers and positioned themselves somewhere halfway between the two.

Just after 08:00, UNITA indicated that 59 Bde was just in front of us. Before we could deploy, 59 Bde activated their tank ambush. We were just slightly east of

their killing ground and not fully exposed to their firing arches. The first T55 round went between my vehicle and that of Cmdt Smit, hitting a tree with a tremendous bang.



A round of some kind also landed in front of my Ratel, but did not explode. It was clear that we would not be able to deploy. I urgently wanted to pull my combat elements out, but could not do so. The rest of the 61 Mech elements were obstructing our withdrawal. It took some time for them to clear the command axis. After about 10 minutes I could disengage. I could only guess the reason for the low frequency of fire on us. We were just entering the killing zone, and FAPLA was busy redeploying closer to us. The terrain was also extremely densely vegetated. We fell back about 4km. Artillery then bombarded 59 Bde.

Warren Sheridan recalls: *“When the FAPLA tanks*

*fired that first shot, it landed in front and to our right. I jumped into the turret and closed the hatch. Once I was in the turret, I realised that this was a tank shooting at us. I jumped back out of the turret. That was when the second shot went off just behind our car. I jumped back into the turret and then out again. This went on for a couple more times. FAPLA also had bushes cut and sharpened the stumps so that we could get punctures. Thank goodness we retreated on the same tracks that we advanced on!"*



Cornie Botes recalls: *"Myself, with 71, and Gerrie Coetzee, with 72, were the two Ratel 90's that had to drive in front. We had to advance 100m, observe, and then report back. Then the other Ratel would go 100m. The bush was so dense that it sometimes felt like we were driving through a tunnel. UNITA's men sat just where the bush started clearing. When they went back to the command vehicle in the rear that T55 let itself be heard. I remember there were men from Intelligence in a Buffel. Some of the Ratels nearly drove over them."*

Pieter Prinsloo recalls: *"We reversed like crazy. It*

*was the only time that I used 21's second reverse gear!"*

Stelios Moraitis recalls: *"All of a sudden there were shots ahead. Call Sign 20 was 50m in front of me. The command group, including 20, came racing past us trying to disengage from the firing. Eventually we managed to turn around and follow the rest. It was not long before we were out of range, but they were still shooting at us with the "Stalin organ". There were explosions all around and I could hear the shrapnel whirring like helicopter blades above my head. There was a lot of dust around and I kept screaming at the driver to keep my directions, but he was driving to avoid the explosions! Suddenly it all stopped and we could re-group. This incident was one of the most confusing during our campaign!"*

Theuns Cloete recalls: *"I just remember how those bombs came rolling on and being deflected off the trees. Now and then one exploded. We reversed as fast as possible. I did not know a Ratel could reverse that fast!"*



## **CHAPTER 12**

### **SURROUNDING THEM FROM THE INSIDE**

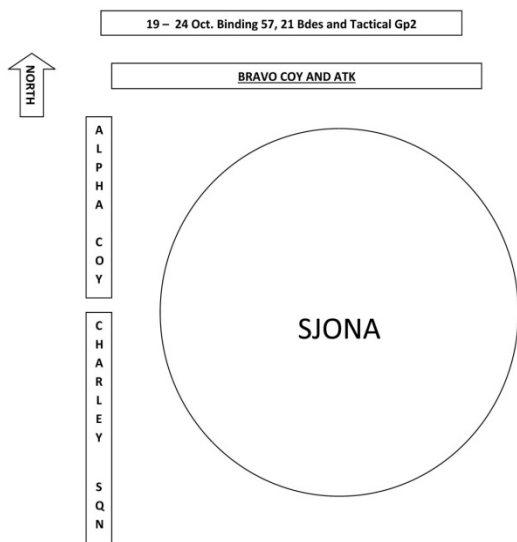
#### **The Wedge - 18 to 24 October**

The situation for 59 Bde worsened. An air force attack inflicted heavy casualties and supplies ran low. Tactical Group 2, consisting of nine T55's, started moving south from the Chambinga Bridge. They halted temporarily at the Vimpulo source. Their next bound was to join up with 59 Bde.

On 18 October 61 Mech deployed to about halfway between the source of the Mianei and Vimpulo rivers. In this vulnerable position, we had 59 Bde about 5km to the west and the advancing Tactical Group 2 about 6km to our north. Our intent was to prevent a link-up between the two forces and to protect the G5's. Any further retreating on our side would have forced the G5's to move further southeast. This would have taken them outside striking distance from the Quito Cuanavale airfield.

At this stage, the G5's were less than 10km from 59 Bde. On the morning of 19 October, Tactical Group 2 was halted in its attempts to join up with 59 Bde by heavy artillery and complimentary air strikes. Their position was 3km south of the Catato woods. About the same time 59 Bde redeployed to alternative positions about 3km from their previous ones. This move brought them even closer to where 61 Mech was deployed. They started preparing alternative positions to be able to accommodate Tactical

Group 2 on its arrival. Simultaneously with this, 21 Bde moved to a position west of the Cuzizi, about 6km from its source and about 4km to our east. Our position became very dangerous.



We were confronted with enemy on three sides: 59 Bde to the west, Tactical Group 2 to the north and 21 Bde to the east. We could not attack anyone of these without risking a combined attack by one or two of the others. We deployed in a semi square in very thick vegetation with about 50m spacing between vehicles. To our rear, there was a large sjona. I could hear heavy FAPLA movement about 4km to our east and about 5km to our west.

The observers continuously reported movement to our north near the Catato Woods. Cmdt Smit showed his skills in directing the artillery fire. There were many artillery bombardments on different targets and in all



directions. On my front, I had two observation posts in some high trees. Anything could happen at any time. It was nerve racking, especially when a heavy contact 3km to our east broke out. The shooting lasted about an hour. We later learned that it was a UNITA contact.



At one stage I was hoping that we could go into an attack, just to break the suspense. Our tactical position was certainly not a healthy one. I was very relieved when, during the night of 24 October, we withdrew to a more sustainable position to the south.

Fernando Almeida recalls: *“We surrounded them from the inside.”*

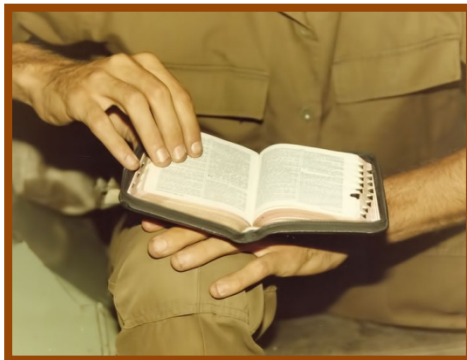
Paul Ronge recalls: *“The G5’s bombarded them continuously, even through the night. That was when I ripped open my sleeping bag, at 02:00, when the G5’s let off a salvo on the enemy from very close to us. We kind off slept with one eye open. We, as troops, were very relieved when we fell back from that position. We knew FAPLA will do everything in its power to get to the G5’s - and we*

*stood in their way.”*



Theuns Cloete recalls: *“At a stage we heard vehicles moving from all directions. From my vantage point, in a tree about 200m in front of our vehicle, I could see dust rising in the north, east and west.”*

On our withdrawal, 59 Bde and Tactical Group 2 exploited the situation rapidly by linking up.



## **CHAPTER 13**

### **NOVEMBER 1987 - OUR CONTINUED STAY WITH 32 BN**

#### **To Mavinga and back**

On 30 October we fell back to Mavinga, where 4 SAI had arrived. We travelled about 70km on that night. We arrived close to Mavinga about midday on 1 September. At last we had some time to get our Ratels properly repaired. That illusion disappeared on the morning of 2 November, when I received orders to return to the source of the Lomba. Our departure on the front left a vacuum, which FAPLA rapidly exploited. They were advancing rapidly.

I expressed my concerns to Bde HQ. I pointed out that we (B Coy and ATk Pl) were active since 11 September. As Bde reserve, we were constantly on the move. When CGp A rested, we were supporting 32 Bn efforts. When 32 Bn went into recess, we moved to CGp A. From 11 September to 30 October we never had more than 48 hours to do proper maintenance. The mechanical and human components were in urgent need of maintenance and rest. Bde HQ took note of my concerns, but the situation on the western front demanded bold action. Even today I fail to understand why we retreated in the first place, when this FAPLA move had been predictable, even prior to our departure from the front.

Should we have stayed on the front, we would have

done what we could, with what we had. When we returned to Mavinga, Bde HQ announced that the objective of the operation had been achieved. That was to stop the FAPLA advance. This created expectations with all of us. At that stage I just felt that Bravo Coy and the ATk Pl were abused. We drove all the way to Mavinga, just to return almost immediately. Röhmer Heitman (War in Angola, P119) quoted Col de Vries as to have made this statement: “Lotter was less than pleased with this decision. His company had been in contact or under threat almost continually since the beginning of the operation, and was now badly in need of rest.”

My confidence in the decision makers received another setback.

Paul Ronge recalls: *“We all thought: ‘Thank you Lord, we survived!’ Everyone was relieved and thankful. Then the order came to turn around. Emotions ran high among our troops. It gave us a nasty blow. It was as if something snapped.”*

Theuns Cloete recalls: *“We would have had the week off to rest. The G5’s got into trouble and we had to go and help. The next week we performed tactical observation and moved from terrain to terrain in search of FAPLA. We nearly had an attack against 59Bde.”*

### **Tactical Group 2 - Mianei**

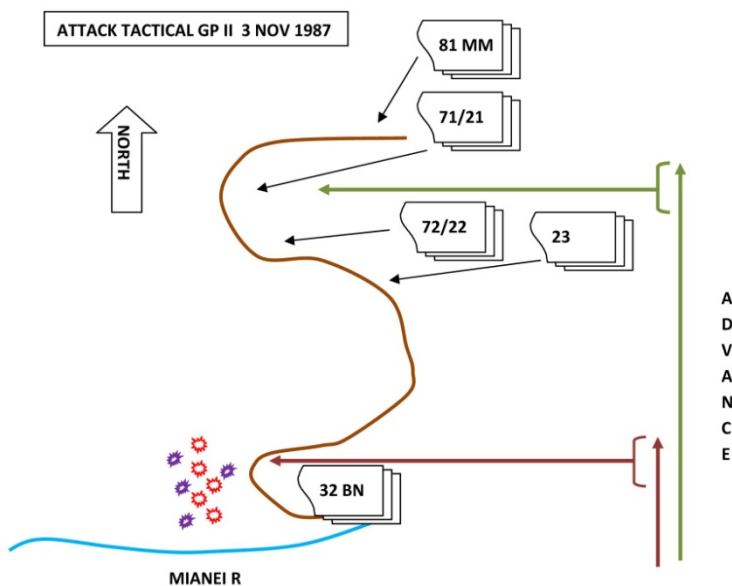
We arrived back at CGp B early the following morning. During the night, a FAPLA force with at least six T55’s

advanced through the gap to a position just 2km from the G5's. Due to some technical problems, the G5's could not relocate to a safer position in time. The real threat was that at least one G5 would have to be destroyed, to prevent it from falling into enemy hands. Hannes Northmann, with eight Ratel 90's and a 32 Bn company, were sent in and clashed with FAPLA at about 08:00.

We were drawn into the battle shortly afterwards. As we were approaching to join up, they were already engaged in heavy fighting. We could hear this from a distance. I had no idea what was going on, and Hannes, being fully occupied in the fight, could not give me directions. I found his axis of command and, with only my Ratel and a small element, followed in. The rest of Bravo and ATk went into a fishbone formation, awaiting instructions. When I had a visual on Hannes I took a few minutes to orientate myself on the situation. I was about 150 meters behind the 32 Bn Ratel 90 line.

They were in close combat with some T55's. I instructed Bravo and ATk, which were about 400m to the rear, to deploy in combat elements. As this instruction was executed, the FAPLA tanks broke contact with Hannes. We did not have the opportunity to integrate or engage. I can only assume that the sudden appearance of Bravo and ATk was a contributing factor to this sudden FAPLA disengagement. Hannes followed up for a few hundred meters with us in depth but FAPLA made a clear break away. Together we were now quite a formidable force of 16 Ratel 90's and 12 Ratel 20's.

We did a quick appreciation. UNITA surveillance followed the tracks of the FAPLA force to establish their intentions. We started the pursuit. We learned that they retreated round the source of the Mianei into a shelter. The plan was that Hannes would occupy the southern high ground and Bravo, ATK and the 81mm mortars the northern one. Wherever the FAPLA force was, one of us could then act as direct fire support base for the other. Hannes was to move to the line of advance and then to halt. This would have given me the time to travel further north for about 1km to reach my starting point.



We reached the starting points between 13:30 and 14:00. We simultaneously started the advance to the terrain forms. I deployed the 81mm mortar fire group in the dead ground just to the immediate east. We learned

that the FAPLA hideout was about 800m due west from the terrain that Hannes was occupying. I therefore deployed the Bravo Coy combat elements to face the south-southwest. We were still deploying when T55's attacked Hannes - just as his Ratels crossed the summit. They clashed on the western flats.

The 32 Bn ATk was confronted at very close distance by the T55's. A real dogfight broke out and shortly afterwards the two forces became entangled. From my position about 800m to the northeast, it was like watching a very real movie. I could not render direct fire support due to this complete entanglement. The 81mm mortar fire group engaged the depth targets. At one stage, Hannes gave me a grid for 81mm fire. The grid reference was exactly where this close quarter fight was progressing. FAPLA was getting the upper hand. Bravo and ATk prepared to attack in support. I questioned Hannes on the accuracy of his grid reference.

Commanders had been court-martialled previously in the bush war for killing own forces with wrong mortar fire. He spoke to me rapidly on the radio: "There is no time for talking f\_cking sh\_t. Just throw, just throw!" The four pipes in the 81mm mortar fire group fired four to six rounds each onto the entanglement (between 16 and 24 bombs). The tanks started to disengage. The mortars continued their effort on the withdrawing tanks. This gave Hannes the opportunity to retreat. We met up at the advance axis.

He was planning an immediate pursuit. However, it

was already late afternoon, and the terrain in which FAPLA disappeared was exactly the same dense bush that we encountered on our first attack on 59 Bde on 17 October. Hannes was not happy to let FAPLA escape, but the time of day and the odds against us convinced him.

At that stage, should we run into serious resistance, we would have been on our own. 61 Mech and 4 SAI were at Mavinga. 32 Bn (Cmdt Hartslief) was not close enough to be able to render support. Even if he had been close enough, it would have been very risky to commit all our forces on the western front. We retreated to the vicinity of the source of the Mianei. For the moment the G5's were safe from ground assault.



## **CHAPTER 14**

### **HUBE 16 NOVEMBER**

#### **Developments to 16 November**

After our attack on the Mianei high ground against Tactical Group 2, we remained under command of CGp B. On 5 November Brig Fido Smith paid Bravo Coy and ATk a visit. We had to prepare a clearing and his helicopter landed about midnight.

He was the only high-ranking officer that visited us for the duration of Ops Modulêr. Bde HQ developed concerns about the morale of the troops. Brig Smit gave us feedback on the developments, but mostly spoke words of encouragement. His concern was, among others, the level of our combat spirit.

The background to this was a premeditated self-injury when one of our members shot himself through his foot. Brig Smit also conveyed the news that Cmdt Muller replaced Cmdt Smit as the officer commanding of 61 Mech. This came as shocking and unwelcome news. We learned to trust Cmdt Smit's judgment unconditionally. This move had a serious impact on the morale of all in 61 Mech.

During the next few days we maintained a low profile, awaiting the next move from FAPLA. Cmdt Hartsliet departed to Bde HQ for planning on 7 November. On 9 November, 4 SAI Bn attacked 16 Bde at

the Chambinga source. CGp A did feigning attacks from the east and CGp B, from the south. When we reached the 59 Bde positions at the Mianeï we found them deserted. Ours were just diversionary movements for the 4 SAI Bn main attack. After the attack by 4 SAI we deployed south of the Mianeï source. 4 SAI Bn resumed the attack on 11 November with 61 Mech as the reserve. There were some regrets expressed on the initial decision to detach Bravo Coy and the ATk Pl to 32 Bn. Without us, 61 Mech was not up to full-strength to act effectively as reserve.

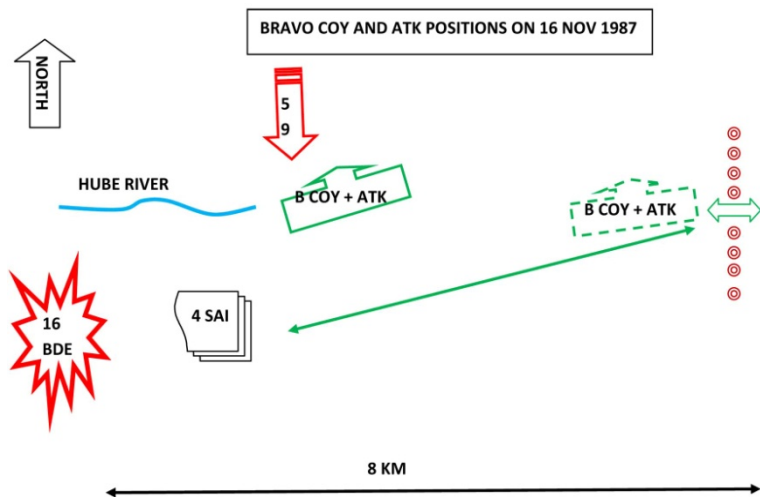
### **Actions on the Hube**

On 16 November, CGp C attacked FAPLA at the Hube source. Due to navigational difficulties, CGp C was not in the correct position and this resulted in a exposed northern flank at the source of the Hube.

We received orders to deploy as the flank force to prevent any interference from Vimpulo. We deployed as instructed. There were some reports that 59 Bde was moving from Vimpulo to the Hube where we were deployed, but we had no direct contact. We only received some over-drops from the actual fight to our west.

Late afternoon 4 SAI Bn attempted to break contact. However, it was not an easy task. A rapidly growing concern was the position of 59 Bde, earlier reported as moving from the Chambinga. They were supposed to have made contact with Bravo Coy and ATk by that time. They did not. That stimulated the idea that 59 Bde was going to cut off the gap in the minefield, which 4 SAI Bn, on their

advance that morning, had to breach. That breach was also to be their retreat exit. It would have been a serious situation should 59 Bde have succeeded in such a move. Bravo Coy and ATK went back to the minefield in anticipation of making contact with 59 Bde. We found the gap unoccupied.

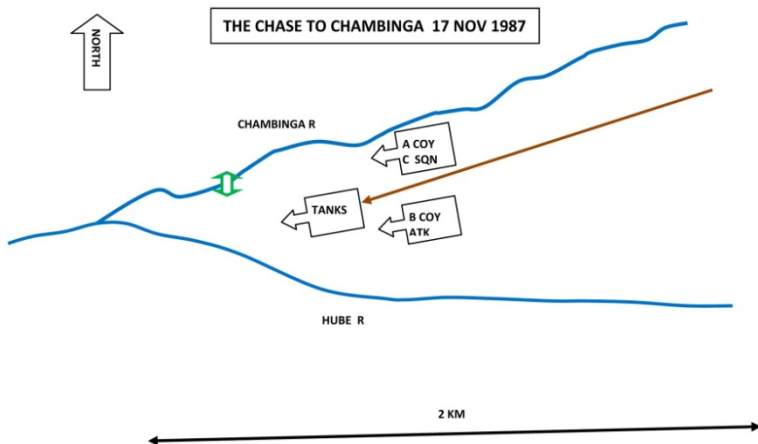


## CHAPTER 15

### OUR FINAL PHASE

#### The Chase to Chambinga

That same evening we reported back to 61 Mech for the final push to the Chambinga Bridge the following morning. The tank squadron was in the lead, with UNITA deployed in a skirmishing formation. Bravo Coy/ATk deployed on the southern side of the axis of advance in an open formation. We advanced, but except for a few loose skirmishes on the UNITA tank-front, there was no contact made that necessitated our intervention. Our artillery maintained a high tempo of fire on the Chambinga bridge. It was clear that all FAPLA forces were west of the bridge. That night we went into a hide with 61 Mech.



The following day, we were informed that the operation was extended, but that this would not affect us.

Ops Hooper would be fought by the relieve troops from the 1987 intake at the training units.

### **Last Obstacles**

The aim of Ops Hooper would be to destroy the FAPLA Bdes west of the Chaminga. To ensure a smooth transition between Ops Modulêr and Ops Hooper it was necessary to keep FAPLA under pressure. There was one last challenge for Bravo Coy/ATk.

It was required of 61 Mech to execute one final attack on the FAPLA Bdes on the high ground north of the Chaminga. The terrain was very difficult and the bush very dense. The very soft sand dunes worsened the situation and an attack with vehicles would have faced serious limitations. The enemy was close to their support base at Quito Cuanavale and a large pool of reserves could be deployed on short notice. They were in strong defensive positions with adequate equipment.

Cmdt Muller involved us in the planning of a night attack on those positions with on-foot infantry. Such an attack would have required leaving the Ratels behind in a hide. The infantry of A and B Coy would advance on foot through this dense bush and soft sand. Then we would engage an enemy in well-prepared trenches, with numbers far superior to our own. To my perception, that was a suicide mission. The whole concept was against all logic. Special reference was made to the operational readiness of our gas masks. I tried to reason with Cmdt Muller, but he was determined that the attack would take place. Risking

my career, I informed him that, should he insist on the attack being executed, he himself must inform the infantry about this lunacy, and the unacceptable risks involved.

During my career I learned to obey commands. However, I also learned through experience in Ops Askari and the exposure in Ops Modulêr up to that stage, that I also had a right to question certain decisions. Cmdt Muller was not pleased with my reluctance. He instructed me to send a representative of each sub-sub unit to him. These representatives had to consist of a mixture of leader group and troop level.

I was not involved in these discussions and was later informed that the attack would not take place. I was prepared to defend my views to the highest authority. I thought that this exhibition would have ended my career. Maybe the logic of my arguments or a real possibility of reluctant troops, forced the hand of the planning staff. Apparently I was pardoned. Nobody mentioned this incident later. I learned that a similar situation happened at 32 Bn about the on-foot attack, with similar results.

### **From Mavinga to Rundu**

By late November we returned to an assembly area near Mavinga. We cleaned our equipment and prepared to hand over our responsibilities to the relief troops from 1 SAI Bn. The handing and taking over went smoothly. Bravo Coy/ATk had a final parade where the “Ouman staff” was presented to them by Genl Bock from UNITA. The ceremony is described in Chapter 3.



We departed to the airstrip at Mavinga and were airlifted to Rundu. The airstrip was muddy and very short for such large aircraft. We watched in amazement as the flights came in and departed. All flights were by night. As soon as an aircraft approached the runway, UNITA troops torched the improvised tins of diesel, to mark the edges. The new troops then disembarked from the back ramp of the aircraft. It must have been quite intimidating to them - the darkness, the longhaired and bearded “oumanne”.

Then the old troops filled up in a line, were counted and embarked. As soon as the quota had been reached the ramp would immediately start to close. The last soldiers were literally sitting on the ramp. Then came the anticipation for the take-off and the relief when we were off the ground. After about an hour we landed at Rundu.

Andrew McManus (A Coy) recalls: *“We flew out from a makeshift dirt runway in the night. There were UNITA people who ran up and down lighting these burning lamps to indicate the runway. The plane was one*

*of those with the ramp at the back. We were standing in a line with one of the crew counting us out: “Go, go, go, stop!” I was the cut off, while my mate Mark Day was one in front. As they ran forward, Mark grabbed me by the front of my jacket and into the plane I went. We were packed in there in total darkness. Being last in, we were literally sitting on the ramp.”*

Johann Nothnagel (1988) recalls: *“I was in the group that took over from you guys in 1987 at Mavinga. We flew in the previous night and as we got off the Flossie a G5 which exploded were loaded. We walked a few km's from the base and slept right next to the road. The next morning we took over the Ratels from the guys that were leaving for the transit camp. We were amazed at how dirty and rough looking these guys were (remember we just came from training in Lohathla).”*



### **Transit Camp Rundu**

From Rundu we were driven back to the transit camp, about 20km inside Angola. When I arrived at the



“defusing” camp, prior to the arrival of the bulk of the troops, I was not impressed. The infantry camp commandant was nowhere to be found. When at last I found him, he was not very sober.

The Medical Corps were responsible to conduct and manage the medical processes. They supplied doctors, dentists and psychologists. The latter was supposed to be the main role players. The rules were short and sweet. No separate accommodation for sub units. All would be issued with new clothes. The bar was opened and you could drink till you drop. No disciplinary actions will be processed. In short, there were no rules and however you interpreted it was up to each individual’s discretion. I thought: “Wow, this is a troop heaven and a control hell”. I decided to go with the flow.

In my opinion this exercise was the greatest defeat of the SAMS (South African Medical Service) ever. The bunch of psychologists started what was intended as a noble effort, but it was just an interesting outing to them. I was informed that it was a SAMS operation and that I should not interfere. “Great”, I thought. It was around 11 o’ clock in the evening when one of the psychologists stormed into my tent and requested that I get my troops under control. The lot got into a fight – Artillery against Infantry, Armour against Infantry, etc. I just turned over and went back to sleep. I can’t remember the value of the band equipment that was destroyed, but it was a lot.

Over the next day or two the hung-over troops were sent through the series of (SAMS) tents to be “de-

stressed”. Unnecessary incriminating reports were placed on file. In my entire military career (17 years Permanent Force and 10 years Citizen Force) I have never seen such a totally humiliating situation, from any right-minded person’s perspective, than what happened there. I believe this is where the expression “SOMFU” (Self Organised Military F\_ck Up) rightly attained its ultimate meaning.

Johan van Niekerk recalls: *“We got everything new in the transit camp. New Browns, T-Shirts, sleeping bags and jockeys! There were doctors, dentists and then social workers and the damned psychologists. They continuously wanted to know: “How did it feel when....?” SADF (SADF general store, also selling alcohol) was the winner, and the band with girls – which we haven’t seen for months. The best de-mob was the case of beer, steaks on the coals and chatting with our mates – worth much more than the “shrinks”! Then also the Kwê 100's with new troops on their way for Ops Hooper... Oh, we knew what was waiting, they didn’t!”*

Paul Ronge recalls: *“After the fighting a couple of the drunken guys became hungry and plucked some chefs out of bed to cook some food. They obviously refused but after a couple of threats they realized they would get trouble and obliged. Concerning the shrinks, some of the guys just told them that they are not in the mood for such sh\_t. We were still in a state of surreality. Our minds were just preoccupied with that airport.”*

Dawid Momberg recalls: *“We were queuing to buy beer. When Bester asked for a case of beer the rookie*

*corporal behind the counter told him he was only allowed to buy two. I can still remember Bester's reply, in a manner that only he could say it: "F\_ck you corporal, hang tight, I am going to call someone." He got his case of beer, and I mine. I took my case of beer and went to sit in front to watch the concert. And who the heck came to sit next to me? Nobody else but General Geldenhuys and Sergeant Major Holiday! After a heck of an initial fright we had lots of conversation and he had a beer with me."*

Jaco Swanevelder recalls: "*We all knew it was just a matter of time before the sh\_t would hit the fan. It was started by 32 Bn's armour men. They were aggrieved by the banners praising the 61 Mech virtues; while there were no banners for 32 Bn. Unnecessary to explain why the 61 Mech men took offence at the sh\_t remarks... Alcohol knows no limits!"*

### **Omuthiya, Tsumeb and Home**

We left the transit camp with Samil 100's (10 Ton trucks) on Saturday, 5 December at 12:00. There were 60 troops per vehicle. The convoys travelled via Grootfontein.

At Tsumeb the 61 Mech Bn Gp Ladies Association awaited the troops with cake and soft drinks. We were all back at Omuthiya by sundown. All the equipment was cleaned and handed back on Monday and Tuesday. On Wednesday we all left for Tsumeb to attend the final parade. At the parade, held on the Tsumeb rugby field, Bravo Coy/ATk received all the possible trophies. We then spent the night in the transit camp in Grootfontein.

The first troops flew back home the next morning.



Jaco Swanevelder recalls: *“Because I was flying to the Transvaal Province I had to say good-bye to good friends that Wednesday, as the Cape Province and Freestate Province guys were flying later. From an emotional viewpoint this was worse than the war. I could not help but cry like a baby. Maybe because I knew that I would probably never see these men, who went through hell with me, again. Or maybe the reality sank in – that we survived a war, having been in the front lines. We landed at Waterkloof Air Force Base and all I could say was that the reception was “underwhelming”! It quickly became apparent that our families and the general public were totally in the dark regarding the actual situation in South West Africa and Angola.....and then we drank!*

## **PART III: MEMORIES**

### **A DAY IN THE LIFE OF**

#### **A Day in the life of a Section 2 IC**

By: John McCrum – Section 2 IC for Ratel 23C

Early in the morning before combat, it was usually still dark when we woke up. Robert Torrani and I would usually take turns making the morning coffee and have a smoke. Things were normally pretty tense, we have had a taste of combat before, so we knew what was coming. Orders would be issued before we set off, so each call sign knew their roll and position in the battle order. As we started out, the sleep wore off, the sun came up, the mood inside the Ratel would lighten a bit, and the usual banter would start.

The closer we got to the starting line, the mood would begin to change; the guys in the back would want to know what was going on. Rob or the Cpl would shout down a commentary. As the artillery rounds began to fall, we knew then we were not far away and the guys would begin to get their equipment ready. Webbing and LMG belts would be checked. Eyes would be peering intently out the windows for any sign of the enemy. The tension inside the Ratel would begin to rise. Rob and the Cpl would be quizzed about the state of the battle. Each artillery round that fell would be evaluated for its proximity to our Ratel,

close ones would silence the mood further.

Peering out the window, we were watching the puffs of sand and the leaves in the trees flutter to the ground from the enemy rounds. That caused me some anxiety knowing that soon the order would come: “Stop! Stap uit!” (Stop! Step out!)

Over the minutes or hours, the battle itself would become a blur. I was in charge of the LMG (light machine gun) group and would stick close to Oosie and Danie, to make sure the LMG was used to maximum effect. There was no fear at that point. We had been drilled well and we knew our job - we were on autopilot. With the order to withdraw, the chance to climb back inside our armoured sanctuary, away from the maelstrom of the battlefield, a sense of relief pervaded the vehicle. We had done it! We had kicked ass and we had survived unscathed!

Rob and the Cpl were bombarded with questions again, this time for news of the outcome of the attack, and more importantly news of our casualties, had we lost any friends? Withdrawing to our laager for the evening was always a great relief, knowing that the danger, at least for that day was over. The trip was usually a chance to digest what had happened and reflect on what could have been.

The banter was a lot lighter, with a lot of story swapping on the events of the day. This carried on over our rat-pack stew. Each guy would contribute a tin or two from his rat-pack, which would be thrown into one pot and heated up over 3 or 4 fuel tablets. Once warm, it would be

served into the individual's Dixie or fire bucket. We would then sit around what was left of the little fire and continue swapping stories of bravado late into the night. I dreaded climbing into my sleeping bag at night to try and sleep, because I knew this was when the fear would begin, this was when I was the most scared thinking about what could have been, how horribly wrong it could have gone, and knowing at some point you would have to do it all over again.

### **A Day in the life of a Ratel 90 Driver**

By: Rudi Nuyts – Driver of 72B

I still remember that day in September 1987. The most unthinkable thing happened, we were sent into Angola. And now they are sending us to experience enemy contact for the first time. I remember the anxiety very well, it was intense, anxiety like I have never experienced before in my life. The knowledge of the reality that it could be your last day was overwhelming. Still, you climb into the Ratel, close the hatch above your head and switch your brain onto a kind of “autopilot”.

We joined the attack on the enemy soon after. The goal seemed to be foot soldiers that dug themselves into trenches. The most difficult was to navigate among the trenches without getting stuck. Naturally, the months of training made sure that we knew exactly how to drive the Ratel. What we were not trained for was the feeling of “it's my life or his”. Ultimately I think, in the heat of

battle, it's about killing your enemy, else he will kill you.

I saw many die that day, as we were a superior force. They tried to flee but to do it through a swamp is a very slow process; through which many of them died. When it was over the first feeling was a sense of relaxation, because the first contact was behind us and we got through safely. Sometime later it was reported that there were FAPLA tanks in the vicinity. "No, it can't be, we only have 90mm cannons on our vehicles and we are not nearly as well armoured as a tank!"

I still remember the drill to look from right to left through the light openings in the bush. It wasn't long before I saw movement a couple of hundred meters in front, to the left. Our 90mm cannon were directed and at that time the tank approached diagonally from the left, unaware of our presence. The first 90mm shot hit the tank and it came to an immediate standstill, and then fired a shot in the direction of its advance – totally away from us. The flame out of the barrel was as long as the barrel itself and somewhere in my heart I hoped that that barrel would not be directed at us.

Another Ratel 90 joined us and together we fired at the tank, round after round. At a stage the crew jumped out and a number of rounds later the tank was totally eliminated. An experience that could never be erased from the mind...



## **A Day in the life of a Platoon Sergeant**

By: Willie Uys - Platoon 6

The life of a Pl Sgt is totally different in the field than when in camp. You don't shout, you speak. You don't swear, you provide advice. You don't lose your temper, you are calm and helpful. You don't find fault, you encourage. Because everyone realise that the one can't do without the other, each one's place is of cardinal importance. The day we went to draw body-bags no one looked the other in the eye, no jokes were made, and no questions were asked, everyone silent and just walking back to the Ratel. I then realised that we were on a new page of the army.

Yet it was an experience not likely to be experienced by many. There was apprehension but nobody was afraid, thanks to well-trained troops and top structure. You quickly get to know people. When you go in to a laager at night, and you make a turn by everybody, you knew exactly what the circumstances were. A Pl Sgt also needed to be sharp during the day. I would never forget the day of 3 October – first a 23mm saw off the trees in front of us and then the artillery. Then the big experience: to see how the enemy was destroyed by our own artillery, MRL's and later by the Ratel 90's.

## **A Day in the life of a Ratel 90 Team Commander**

By: Theuns Cloete – Team Commander, 71C

Everything starts when we receive orders and it is explained to us. The first couple of times the fear starts here already, but you get used to it. The advance usually started the previous night and we therefore started driving by sun-down. The aim was to be at the goal by first light and also to avoid MiGs. At first light, when you are supposed to make contact, you are already so tired and sleepy that it is very difficult to keep your wits about you.

When you go past the starting line, and Major puts his thumb in the air to wish you well, you and the crew feel OK, because there is someone who knows what is waiting and is thinking of us. The part that came next was the most difficult; searching for the enemy; and the first shot from the enemy could be fired at any moment. The feeling when the first shot is fired was terrible. The fright is so severe that you are wide awake, and then things start happening in slow motion around you.

I think that if you did not have a “number 2” recently it is now the time to hold it in. From now on things are running like a machine. Everything drilled into you for the last year and a half now happens automatically. It feels a bit wrong when you shoot the first couple of souls, but then reality strikes - it is either you or them. Sometime into the battle you even start getting brave and then it feels as if nothing and no one can shoot you. When the battle is

over and you pull back you feel good for a while. Everything went well and the enemy was defeated. Then only comes the scare. What if this or that happened? Are Gunner Bester and Driver Smitty ok?

When you notice the small-arms marks on the Ratel you can only say thanks that it wasn't an RPG or 23mm fire. When doing the debriefing about the contact, and we are all talking to each other, with our voices sounding so funny, like you are breathing helium, then we laugh again.

### **A Day in the life of a Ratel 20 Gunner**

By: Robert Torrani - 23C

My recollections as a Ratel 20 gunner during Modulêr are mainly flashbacks, and in no particular order of battles, but general experiences. The life I led after the army has caused some memory lapses, intentional or not, I do not know, but I believe things in my life trigger memories when I am ready to deal with them. Being in 23C, we were used a lot in reserve. I have memories of also fetching the echelon vehicles and escorting them to where the rest of the company was, so that the battalion could refuel, etc. This meant that on a few nights we did a bit of night driving, which in itself is hair-raising, as sometimes there were different tracks going off in different directions, but we always seemed to arrive at the correct destinations.

The things I remember from the battles: the night

before an attack was generally when we would be moving into positions for the following days march. When we would stop in position and wait for dawn, I remember sitting on the Ratel watching and listening to the artillery rounds, going overhead, being thankful we are not on the receiving end of those. The marches and the attacks I must admit, I cannot recall ever being nervous.

I put this down to the amount of training we did, that you go into an automation mode. The thing I battled the most with on the Ratel 20, as a gunner, was not having vision all round, but having to scan through the sights and portholes around you. This really got to me. Therefore, I would open the hatch, and every now and then pop my head out the turret, just to orientate myself and see the surroundings.

Perhaps, not having the all-round vision could also be one of the reasons why I was not nervous, as I could not see much of what was happening around me, just what I could see through the gun sights and those I was confident I could deal with.

## **SPECIAL TRIBUTES**

### Dawid Lotter: Bravo Company Commander

I want to bring a special tribute to the crew of my Ratel (20). It could certainly not have been easy to directly serve under me, in the small space of the command vehicle. You had to courageously endure a lot. Thank you for it; even if it is 26 years later. An extra special token of compassionate appreciation to my driver, Van Wyk, and my gunner, Karel Koen. Thanks, Van Wyk, that our vehicle was always the cleanest. Thanks for all the hours you spent making sure that there were never any mechanical problems. Thank you for the patience that allowed the storms, that was part of Call Sign 20, to roll past. Thank you for having unconditional respect for me. You rarely addressed me directly.

To Karel, thanks Karel that you walked with me every step of the way, either in the turret, or on the ground. Thank you for patiently fetching me each time I got lost in the open laager. All you said was: "Just sit still, I'll be there just now." Thanks for understanding me and being more of a friend than a troop. Thanks for that night when I just passed out on my stretcher from sheer exhaustion. Thanks for all the times when we could throw dirty clothes in the same container, and you excused me for missing my turn treading on it. Thanks for everything!

### Sean Hoffman

A tribute to all my brothers-in-arms 1987, to Bravo Company, to the fallen, to the good and bad times and to you, Major, for the part you played. We came to you as boys and you taught us, prepared us, lead us, as we carried out the tasks entrusted to us. Along that journey we became soldiers and men. Thank you for then and thank you for your input now.

### John McCrum

To the men of 23C and Bravo Coy, my brothers-in-arms, Salute! We share a special bond that can never be broken. I was never a hero, but I served with a company of heroes. To Major Dawid Lotter, a special thanks for teaching us so much, the value of never giving in: 'Winners never quit & quitters never win', a lesson I have carried with me my whole life. Thank you for taking us to hell and back, you brought us all back safe and sound. It was a hell of a journey and one I will never forget.

### Paul Ronge

To all the men of Pl 6 that was with me at 61 Mech: I want to salute you, because we went through a lot in that time - that changed us from mouse to man. We learned how to handle disappointment, anticipation, bad news, hunger, thirst, fear, circumstances, etc. (The list is too long.) A special thanks to the section leaders, with whom I clashed heads so often. I sometimes did not make your job

easy, especially when we had to do maintenance on a Saturday afternoon...

Then, lastly, I want to say to you, Major, there are not enough compliments for you. For me personally, you had a lot of influence on a lot of people's lives. GOD tells us in his great Book that you would not be tested above your limits. It is my declaration that, under your command, we stared death in the eyes on multiple occasions, and came out whole on the other side.

### Dawid Momberg

This is addressed to Dawid Lotter and Johan Kooij. It is something I have to get off my chest after 26 years. The day in 1988 when I saw Johan Kooij getting the Honorus Crux, I was angry and disappointed. I wondered how he could get it by giving a couple of commands; what about all the rest of 72's men that performed the real actions?

I can remember never in my life being as afraid as I was that night. Never have I seen four Ratels shooting so many rounds to allow the rest of the combat group to fall back. However, as the years passed and wisdom came, I managed to understand. Brave troops require dynamic leaders to give commands, so that everyone could be safe that night. I salute Johan Kooij and Dawid Lotter and pay tribute to 72 as a whole. I am proud to be able to say I was part of you.

## Jaco Swanevelder

I am proud and honoured to be able to say that I could fight along with the bravest, most disciplined soldiers. In my book the crews of all the 61 Mech Ratel 90's that fought in Modulêr, should have received more than the usual medals. It does not matter who said what, we came, we saw, we conquered. Johan's Honorus Crux is like a sports trophy; the captain receives it but it actually belongs to the whole team. I, for one, am just as proud of Johan's HC as what he should be.

On 23 Augustus 2012 eight members of 61 Mech, Bravo Coy's ATk platoon saw each other again for the first time in 25 years, thanks to Facebook and hard detective work. I started searching for the men of the ATk platoon in 2011 and, apart from the men present, namely Louis Smit, Marius Jonker, Theuns Cloete, Pieter Pieterse, Stefanus Le Roux, Johan Kooij and Cornie Botes, also made contact with six other members of ATk. I also had to learn that three of our comrades have passed away.





## THE MOMENTS, THE FEAR

This part looks at the years after the war, and some of the impacts that the war had. Over the period of 5 to 14 July 2013 I conducted a survey on the effect that the war had on 61 Mech Bn Gp veterans. The sample group consisted of 64 respondents, with the highest rank a Major General, down to troop level.

The interesting aspect that stands out from the analysis is that the war did have a long term influence, even up to the present, on 39% of the participants. 23% reported that they did not experience any side effects. 17% reported initial problems, but they worked through it. 5% did not experienced any side effects immediately after the war, but did developed side effects later in life.

I did an interview with the newspaper “Beeld” and the article was published on 6 June 2013. This is my story as recorded by Willemien Brummer.

### ‘A Happy Machine’

Not everyone had a story with a neat beginning, middle and end. Dawid Lotter (56) is a former commandant in the Army that kept silent for 30 years. Last month he told “By” his story for the first time.

“Everyone always wants to know about the operations. Nobody else ever asked how I feel”, he said over the phone from Klerksdorp. His internal war started in 1983, during Operation Askari. He was member of the Permanent Force; at 27 already a captain and commander

of a combat team. He stuck war-pictures from the “Huisgenoot” magazine onto his freshly painted walls since he was little. Today he wants to go back to war, come hell or high water. “I am a professional soldier, so when I put on my uniform I am a machine, a happy machine. I don’t ask questions. Just do not expect of me to senselessly place people’s lives on the altar.”

Late December 1983 his combat group launched an attack on FAPLA and Cuban positions in the Angolan town of Cuvelai. With him in the combat group was a young second lieutenant, a mortarist with whom he had a close bond. His voice quivers on the other side of the phone line. “He was a remarkable person. In the short time that I had to get to know him I developed a very high opinion of him.” They were detached together with a citizen force group that went in first with 12 Ratels. Lotter and his group covered the rear.

“We hit contact and immediately there was total confusion. The citizen force troops became totally panicked, turned around and charged back. In the commotion the young officer and his Ratel (who in the battle order needed to stay close to the commander) became separated from David. “The next moment I could see a round of an anti-aircraft gun going through his turret, and I could only see the spray of blood. I cannot prove it, but in my mind I am convinced that he was actually shot by one of our own Ratels.”

For the rest of his career his mind was stuck on that day. “I just could not accept the manner in which the

mortar lieutenant died.” His world collapses. At home, during leave, he feels alienated from his family and friends. Shortly thereafter he gets the first of several syncope-attacks (loss of consciousness) which make him end up in military hospital. During these periods he is detached from reality; all he knows is that he wants to return to the battlefield. The doctors perform tests but find nothing.

In 1987 Dawid becomes commander of Combat Group Charlie during Operation Modulêr in Angola. From middle September to middle November a 48 hour period never pass in which he is not involved in larger or smaller fire fights. It’s a resounding victory and he is blissfully happy. “During the psychological debrief I gave the correct answers so that there could be no suspicion about my actual emotional state. The total interview was about three minutes anyway.”

That year his company wins all the available trophies, but during his leave the tears flow. He returns to the 61 Mech base at Omuthiya a week before anyone else and sits in the deserted base all on his own. “I started drinking, what should I do now? The troops looking after the base are not my troops, they have their own lieutenant. Nobody told me I am not a company commander anymore. It was the saddest time in my whole life. I had a lovely hut with a fridge and TV, but each night I chose to sleep in a different tent that belonged to my troops. That way I felt a little bit of closeness to the troops. I begged to go back to war.”

In May of that year he gets his company back, but barely two weeks later he is transfer to Walvisbay, without reason and with immediate effect. He refuses and starts to think of ways to end his own life. That year he is admitted to 1 Military Hospital twice after things blacked out around him for the umpteenth time. Over Christmas the psychiatric ward is kept open because of him. "I get my food and further see no one outside those times. No doctor or senior nurse makes the effort to check in on me, because they think I am suffering from hypochondria."

His voice is hoarse. "It was very traumatic for me, because I knew I was not faking it. Why, in any case, would I black out when the war is over? I have nothing to prove. The saddest is the matron that came to visit me, telling me off about my "selfishness", because I deprive people the right to be with their families. At that stage I really started hating the system with a passion."

Back at the Army College, where he has since been transferred, he took his refuge in sleeping pills and alcohol. He buys two apartments in Sunnyside, Pretoria, without exactly remembering why or how. In 1990 Dawid resigns from the Army after ending up in hospital for the umpteenth time. "It feels as if you just blow a fuse. I do not know what they thought, but nothing happened. No counselling, nothing."

"It feels as if I do not fit anywhere. My family does not understand me, my colleagues do not understand me, the army does not understand me, and I do not understand myself. Something remains amiss."

The past 23 years he jumps from one job to another, because he cannot handle the routine of “normal life”. He works as security manager, insurance agent and even as mercenary at Executive Outcomes. He keeps the pot boiling with funds obtained by attending Citizen Force camps. “I hate the army with a passion, but at the same time I wish with all my might to return to the army.”

He does lucrative security work in Nigeria. There he sees a delivery truck losing control and crushing a Land Rover onto a rock face. “The whole lot explodes in a sea of fire. Suddenly everything comes back to me. Every time when something traumatic happens I am jolted back to the mortars lieutenant, to Askari.”

Only in 2008, when he completed his master's degree in occupational health and safety, his condition started to make sense to him. He obtains a doctorate and began his own practice as a life coach in Klerksdorp. He hesitates. “The thing with life coaching is that every time someone opens his heart and I see similarities with mine, I get flashbacks.”

He has nearly a thousand articles on post-traumatic stress on his computer. He is not formally diagnosed as he mistrusted psychologists ever since his army days. “Over the past 15 years I never had a blackout again, but something remains amiss. It does not matter anymore what the young lady, that just graduated, is going to tell me. I know that I am not going to listen to her, and I know that I am not going to open my heart to her.”

He analysed himself according to the criteria for PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) in the DSM-IV and met the requirements. It however means nothing to him, he says, because he still feels dead inside. However, he still pours hours of his time on the 61 Mech website and Facebook page to assist others who also suffers from PTSD.

Dawid remains silent on the other end of the line. “What I am telling you is not dramatized one iota. It is exactly how it happened, and it’s probably why I am a loner to this day. I don’t even want a dog, because dogs die and it hurts too much.” (Willemien Brummer)

<http://www.beeld.com/bylae/2013-06-07-jy-mag-maar-voor-jou-ratel-huil>

### Rudi Nuyts: The Later Years

I think that today, more than ever before in the past 25 years, I can look back with objectivity on the events and experiences of Angola. When I look back, I must firstly conclude that I hardly spoke about the events and my experiences in the first 15 to 20 years after these experiences. When I did try to speak about those experiences, I guess the deepest need of my heart was just to be able to freely speak about it without having to feel the hurt inside all over again, but that didn't seem to work well.

I recall very well what the psychiatrists told us when we left Angola in that 'transit camp'. They told us that we would want to speak to people about our experiences and

that people would 'look at you wide eyed' and not understand. Of course this was probably good advice but a young man, coming out of war experiences, needed so much more than just those empty words. Indeed, back in 'civvy street' people would sort of stare blankly when you were trying to tell of seeing people die before your own eyes, and of course this only inspired the mouth to shut itself again.

The irony is that I wasn't one of those 'bush-crazy' guys who had just served in Namibia, and wanted to do some boastful talking, I was really and truly hurting deep inside and hoping to somehow find help to be able to deal with that hurt in a sensible way. What I also recall is that, in that transit camp after leaving Angola, for the first time in my life I ordered myself a whole lot of beers, and drank all of those on that day there in that transit camp. I guess this is the way that the army hoped to somehow quietly soothe us by allowing us alcohol as much as we wanted.

The irony is that I grew up in a house where alcohol was abused, and had a very deep resentment of alcohol myself. Yet slowly but surely from that day onward, I started to give my life over to the influence of alcohol. I suppose in a way I was trying to deal with my own inner feelings, which society around me could not help me with. The army seemed not to care about it, or want to help. After the army, I went on holiday for a few months, but soon had to look the reality of life in the eyes. I started on my first job. Together with the luxury of an income, the alcohol problem increased until, by 1991, it was totally out of control and I was a complete alcoholic.

At this point I reached a deep point of desperation and hopelessness in my life, and was about to make a drastic decision about ending my own life. There just did not seem to be any sense anymore in living any further. Before finally making this decision though, I sat on the floor in my room and said: “God, if you are there, you really need to intervene because otherwise I will have to end my life”. In that one moment I arose from the floor, and experienced an indescribable joy in my heart. In that one moment the whole of my life changed.

I have never had a drop of alcohol over my lips since that moment. However, I still suffered from all the feelings that were buried deep inside me. It took another 15 or so years to really start experiencing the first form of healing. I realised over the years that just trying to ignore all of those feelings, and having the associated emotion control my life, certainly was not a solution. One day I got in contact with a journalist from a well-known newspaper. For the first time since Angola, I wrote my entire story to him in a letter, and it did me a lot of good. Not long after that, Facebook came onto the scene and one was able to link up with other soldiers who had gone through the same things - whom you knew understood exactly what you were talking about when you told your story. Each occasion, being able to speak about the experiences of the past, and knowing that you were being understood, brought little bits of inner healing.

I still sometimes become overwhelmed by emotion when I think about some of the Angola experiences, especially when I think of the parents that no longer have



their children, and when I think of the fellow soldiers who have to live with the physical injuries they suffered. Yet I am grateful to God that, to a large degree, the sting has been removed from the internal injuries I so long carried with me in my life.



10 May 2013 - Dickie Fritz Bombshell

Stelios Moraitis, Dawid Lotter, Jaco Swanevelder, Nico van Rooyen, Johan Kooij, Wikus Gibson, Eben Pretorius

(Note: The ties and blazers with pocket emblem visible in the photograph above are that of the 61 Mechanised Battalion Group Veteran's Association.)

## EPILOGUE

Previous invasions into Angola by the SADF can largely be described as the end of the beginning. But Ops Modulêr certainly was the beginning of the end.

I am the most fortunate person on earth to have been at the right place at the right time, with the right people in my team, to witness this critical phase in South African history. In my memory is embedded the admiration for a unique pride of lions. BRAVO COMPANY AND ANTI TANK PLATOON, OPS MODULêR, 61 MECH BN GP 1987.

How do I say thanks after so many years? How do I express my appreciation towards BRAVO COMPANY AND ANTI TANK PLATOON, OPS MODULêR, 61 MECH BN GP 1987? Whichever way I try to word it, it appears watered down when measured to the deepest respect I have for these people.

### VENI, VIDI, VICI

PS: If I can have 1987 over again, I will approach certain things differently. I will be more compassionate, there will be less toggle rope. But one thing that I would never change is the remarkable people with whom I had the privilege to work with.

In humble recognition,

Dawid Hermanus Lotter